

A Unique Expression of God's Love

by Dave Kahle

If there is one central truth to Christianity, it is this: God loves us to a degree beyond our ability to comprehend. As we are so often reminded, “God so loved the world that He gave His one and only son . . .”

Yet, we often forget that central fact, or think in such a way as to ignore its existence. Those of us in the house church movement have been guilty of this. We often talk about house churches in the context of a reaction against the institutional church. It's difficult to say anything about house churches without drawing the contrast to the institutional church. For example, in trying to describe a house church to someone we might say, “House churches generally are not led by ordained ‘pastors’ the way that institutional churches are.” Or, “House churches don't have ‘church buildings’ like institutional churches do.” Or, “Unlike the spectator form of worship service we see in the institutional churches, house church gatherings are interactive, participatory events.”

In each of these cases, we describe the house church movement as a reaction against the practices of the institutional church. And, of course, we make the case that the house church is the original pattern found in scripture, while the institutional church is a man-made perversion of God's plan.

While all this makes sense to those of us within the house church movement, this rhetoric leaves our institutional church brothers and sisters shaking their heads at our total confusion of thought. We've all had the experience of trying to talk to an institutional brother about house churches and sense that glaze come over their eyes, a symptom of their mental dismissal of our position. Normally, they then change the subject to describe some new program of their church. “We're sponsoring an outreach to college students at the local campus,” they say, as if that explains everything. Yet, unfortunately, it often is the last word. These encounters turn out to be unenlightening for both parties. They go away thinking, “That guy is a radical.” We, just as sure of ourselves, go away frustrated, thinking, “They just don't get it.”

But, maybe it is us! Maybe we just don't get it! Maybe we don't get what house churches are all about.

Instead of positioning house churches as a reaction against the errors of the institutional church, we ought to see house churches as a unique expression of God's love for His children. Instead of seeing house churches as a correction of the mistakes of the church system, we ought to see them as a God-inspired solution for some individuals. House churches are a special expression of God's grace, a unique initiative of His love, God's provision for a number of His children who are disappointed, disgruntled and depressed.

The unfortunate reality of our time is that the overwhelming majority of Christians are content in the institutional church. They are so deeply imbued with the pastor-centric model that they cannot really consider an alternative. The house church movement is, at this point in its growth, not for them.

On the other hand, we all know that there are hundreds of thousands of disgruntled, disconnected Christians in the world around us. These are people who have left the institutional church and exist in the limbo of non-attachment—they are not a part of a Christian community.

There could be variety of reasons that they are disconnected. Some could have had bad experiences in their churches. It could be that they were snubbed, ignored or dealt with inappropriately by the clergy at some past church home. Perhaps, the pastor didn't show up when a loved one was in the hospital. Or, they were snubbed or gossiped about at a committee meeting. Or, they were pressured for money in some church fund-raising. Regardless, they were hurt. Because of that, they left the church and have not been able to move beyond the hurt to some other church affiliation. Their disillusionment with the institutional church isn't with the system; it is with some specific person or congregation that became a symbol of things wrong with the system.

Then there are those who grew beyond the institutional experience. They went through a time of heavy involvement, taught the Sunday School classes, attended church gatherings three times a week, sent their kids to the youth group, headed the committees, etc. Somewhere in this process, they felt that their experience was short of the mark. Something was missing. They witnessed the familiar patterns of church politics, power struggles among the "clergy" and "burnout" among the active. After a time, they gave up and moved out of the institutional church. Some have become permanent church shoppers, attending the latest "hot congregation" for a while, or picking and choosing the flavor of the day based on their mood of the moment.

Still others hang out in anonymity, shunning involvement with the institutional church, sliding in and out of the back pews of mega churches, but frustrated and unaware of any alternative.

There are those whose study of the Bible brought them to the theological support of the house church from a biblical perspective. They may not have had a bad personal experience, and may not have lived through the deficiencies of the institutional churches. Their study, however, has led them to conclude that God's plan is not a church building on every block and pastors in every pulpit.

God loves all of these people, too. He loves them so much that He wants them to have a life lived in Christian community. He wants them to exercise the "one anothers" of the New Testament (Gal. 6:2, Eph. 4:32, etc.), to grow in spirit and in truth, to worship Him, and to spread the word.

He loves them so much that he has energized the house church movement, and spread its seeds throughout the world like a farmer throwing seed onto the fields. The house church movement is one of His solutions for those of His children who, for one of the reasons listed above, will not find community and connection in the institutional church.

Once we recognize this, we will stop trying to find fault with the institutional church, we will no longer talk about house churches only in contrast to our more bureaucratic brothers, and we will stop trying to convert every institutional Christian we see to our more "enlightened" practices. Rather, we'll seek out the disgruntled and disconnected among us, and offer the house church for what it is: an expression of God's love, an outreach to a significant and growing population of His children. There may be a time in the not too distant future that house churches will become the mainstream option for the mass of Christians. But, in the meantime, house churches are a unique expression of God's love to His disaffected children.

"For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only son . . .," and then energized the house church movement for his hurting and disillusioned children.

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