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## **House Churches 2**

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-- *Commentaries from past newsletters* --

Previously I reviewed a book entitled "Paul's Idea of Community" by Robert Banks. I liked what I read, for there was a message that the church needed to hear. I outlined, in the review, some of the assets he felt the church had lost but still needed. After I finished it, I loaned the book to my daughter-in-law. She liked it so much she and a group of her friends decided to start a house church like those described by Banks. To add some leaven to the group they asked us to come. We are the "old folks" in the congregation.

We have now met for almost one year, and it has been such an illuminating experience I thought I would relate some of my observations. The group has ten adults and 16 children. The adults are all in their thirties except Elizabeth and I who are in our sixties. The children range in age from 12 years to 10 months. We meet at 3:30pm on Sunday afternoon. The children play for 30 minutes, then we get together for singing. This lasts for another thirty minutes. The children choose at least half the songs. Next, there is a time of sharing what the Lord has done in our lives. The children eagerly participate. We then take prayer requests and offer them up to the Lord. The children again take part in the prayer time, and volunteer to pray in response to a request. When we have finished praying, the children under 5 often want to go out to play. Next, one of the adults gives a short message in simple clear language.

After the message we celebrate the Eucharist and have a blessing for the regular meal that is to follow. We then eat in non-family groups. After the meal we sing a song of thanksgiving and close with a blessing. The order varies, but these are the standard elements of the service.

What has been so meaningful to all of us has been the participation of the children. They love it! They eagerly sing and pray. Many time their prayers are limited in content, but they are fervent. It pleases us when they ask for prayers for their friends who come from homes where there is turmoil and few religious practices. The children also hear their parents prayer requests for their own needs. Since we occasionally practice laying on of hands for healing or special anointing, the children can participate in this ministry.

We strive to teach the children fundamentals of the faith. In the homilies we present we try to remind them of the importance of salvation, worship, the Eucharist, baptism and discipleship, as well as the reality of sin, the necessity of repentance, the gift of forgiveness and other essentials of our faith. In a recent service, my son, who was the leader, gave a short message on sin. Then he had

us all write down on a slip of paper one sin we had recently committed. I sat behind him, therefore, I could see what was written on the slips of paper. Most of the children admitted they had lied. One admitted to selfishness, another to causing his sibling to get blamed for something he did, another to stealing, another for getting angry etc. Ben then discussed the biblical basis for dealing with sin, emphasizing the role of repentance and forgiveness. We then prayed a prayer of confession, verbalized our repentance and asked for forgiveness. At this point another parent related the confession, repentance, and forgiveness just performed to our celebration of the Eucharist. We begin the common meal with a simple Eucharistic service.

Why does these services seem so important to me? In reflecting on my experience as a father, I realize that I did not raise my children with Christian discipline and instruction. I was a pagan for the first sixteen years of my marriage, therefore, my oldest children did not benefit from the change that took place in my personality and my belief system. Even the youngest got little benefit from my conversion. I brought an enormous amount of behavioral garbage into my Christian life. Even though I was dramatically changed by my conversion, it took God several years to clean me up. At best, my younger children could receive only partial benefit. My other failure was a result of ignorance. I believed my children were going to get instruction in the institutional church needed to live a Christian life. It was only after I had served on the curriculum resources committee of the United Methodist Church for eight years that I realized they would not learn about the treasure they had in their faith. They were not spiritually prepared for right living, or for coping with the vicissitudes of life.

We cannot continue to compound our mistakes. Children need to learn the real meaning of their faith, the necessity of salvation, the need for discipleship, how to use their faith in coping with the problems of life, and learn that Christian values make a favorable difference in their lives. They do, though, need more than didactic instruction. They need to see faith in action. But how can they if they are sequestered away from the life of the church, if there is any life? How can they learn if they are not allowed to participate in the real life of the church? It does them no good to hear the children's sermon, and then go to another place in the church where they play "Christian games." How can they learn to pray if all they hear is two or three rote prayers or pastoral prayers? How can they learn to apply scriptural principles to their living if they never learn to search the scriptures to find what the Word of God says about a problem? How can they learn to use the Bible as a guide book if they never see anyone use it for that purpose? How can they learn to trust God if they never heard of his trustworthiness? How can they learn that he is a loving father if their parents don't teach them? How can they learn who Jesus is, and what he did for him if they never hear testimony of his faithfulness? How can they learn about the work and person of the Holy Spirit if they never hear about him? Do you know the answers to these and all the other questions that life poses?

In the past we could have answered these questions better than we can today. Our laws, our social customs, our literature, our educational system, our family life and our moral behavior arose out of our faith. We were indeed one nation under God. Because the leaders of our society were responsible to God, everyone who related to us in any way tried to guide us according to biblical principles. It was difficult to escape this moral instruction. Today it is a different story. Humanism is the guiding philosophy of our society. According to the humanists we are all gods. We refuse to deprive ourselves of pleasures. In keeping with humanistic philosophy we have adopted situation ethics to determine the rules we live by. The result is that children do not learn ethical behavior .

This decay in our mores has come about as a result of the failure of the moral pacesetter, the church, to teach boldly a Christian moral philosophy. It has compromised with the world, and as a result it is secularized. This failure to teach basic biblical principles of responsible right living is reflected in social decay we now observe. When people do what they want to do, they behave according to their human nature and disobey God's law. When people live according to their human nature they get involved in witchcraft, they worship idols, they use of drugs, are sexually promiscuous, have illegitimate pregnancies, spread sexually transmitted diseases, indulge in sexual violence and spousal and child abuse, and other sins like these.

This failure to teach responsible right living has resulted in the kind of selfishness that breaks down the family. Humanists have set as their primary goal the destruction of the family, and they have achieved their purpose. They desire to impose their views on society. Now they are doing it. They have done it by infiltrating the educational establishment, the media, the churches and other educational institutions that can influence our thought. But, surprise, surprise, it is not a better world, it is a frightening place to live. To illustrate this point I will relate a conversation I had with one of my colleagues. He told me his daughter's 7th grade class has twenty-six children. She is one of three that live in an intact home. A few nights after they had a birthday party for their daughter, one of her classmates called from another birthday party and wanted to know how to contact a social worker. The reason for the need was to get protection for a classmate whose drunken mother was physically abusing her in that public gathering. This took place in a town where the socioeconomic level of the community at large is quite high. It did not take place in a ghetto.

Since morally infectious environments infect those who live in them, we Christians have to recognize the need to prepare our children to live in a morally infectious world. Several sociologists have shown that children are immune to infection by the environment if they grow up in Christian homes. Since the church has failed us, we must do all we can in our own homes to teach God's principles of right living. Even if revival occurs in our nation, we have to sacrifice for at least one generation to preserve our most priceless heritage, our children (or

grandchildren). We cannot trust the schools to teach our children Christian values. We cannot expect the teachers to serve as role models. We cannot trust the legislature, the state Department of Education or our local school boards to protect them from instruction that includes humanistic, hedonistic, or New Age moral philosophy.

We need to act. We must pray for revival and ask God to guide us as we protect our children. We have to be willing to make the investment of time and money to bring this about. They must have spiritual immunity to protect them from the infectious moral diseases that exist in our society. House churches can do this very well.