HISTORICAL ROOTS OF THE MODERN HOUSE CHURCH MOVEMENT

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INTRODUCTION

Floyd Filson, in a seminal article published in 1939, argued that the scholarship of his day failed to understand the New Testament Church for the simple reason that it had failed to understand the physical realities under which the Church practiced her faith. Specifically, he thought the “function of the house church should be carefully considered.”\(^1\) His challenge was answered, and in recent decades, there has been a spate of studies on everything from the archaeology to the social structure of early house churches.

A serious question can be raised as to how these studies have influenced the ecclesiologies of contemporary Protestant churches. All the major denominations found in the United States were established long before Filson’s article or the subsequent research it prompted was published, and yet it seems that from a strictly historical perspective, church practices are still broadly the same as they have been for over two hundred years.

There has been, however, a rise of a movement that “does church” very differently—a church model its adherents call “the organic church.”\(^2\) It has not at all been unified, as the overview of its history below will demonstrate. Still, modern scholarship has done very little to address either its history or its breadth—at least, not in North America—an oversight that grows more severe with each passing year. While there have been a plethora of studies published on the Chinese House Church movement, little has been written to address this phenomenon’s rapid growth in the West.\(^3\)

This paper, then, seeks to offer a broad outline of this movement’s growth in recent years. Primary interest will be given to its predecessors (e.g., Schwenkfeld and Wesley), though it is readily admitted that it would be anachronistic to refer to them as “organic” in this movement’s sense. Specifically, the paper will examine some of the movement’s roots in the Apostolic era, the Protestant Reformation, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and in more modern times. It seeks to show that the modern house church movement is not a novelty, but rather that it has strong historical precedent and roots in the very concepts that brought about the Protestant Reformation. It should also be noted that this is not to suggest that the modern house church movement is superior to or should be preferred over the traditional church structure. Such


\(^2\) See, for instance, Frank Viola and George Barna’s *Pagan Christianity* (Carol Stream, IL: Barna, 2007), xxi. Strictly, Viola insists “the term organic church does not refer to a particular model of church,” but then goes on to describe components of “organic churches,” namely, that they are “dynamic, mutually participatory, every-member-functioning, Christ-centered, communal expression[s] of the body of Christ.” (ibid., xxxv)

\(^3\) According to Barna, anywhere from 3% to 24% of all American adults now say that they have attended such services in the past month. The wide range of answers depends on how the question is phrased. For details, see George Barna’s, “How Many People Really Attend a House Church?” Barna.org, available online http://www.barna.org/organic-church-articles/291-how-many-people-really-attend-a-house-church-barna-study-finds-it-depends-on-the-definition (accessed October 12, 2012).
questions are best left for theological and cultural studies. The goal here is to merely examine its legitimacy, and that specifically from a historical perspective.

ROOTS OF THE HOUSE CHURCH MOVEMENT

Apostolic Roots

There is no doubt that the earliest Christians met in houses. This is said explicitly in both the New Testament (cf. Acts 5:42; Rom. 16:5; Col. 4:15; etc.) and confirmed by modern scholarship. This practice continued until Constantine legalized the faith. Philip Schaff’s words are telling:

After Christianity was empowered by the state to hold property, it raised houses of worship in all parts of the Roman Empire. There was probably more building of this kind in the fourth century than there has been in any period, excepting perhaps the nineteenth century in the United States.

Despite the lack of dedicated church buildings, it is well known that the Church was remarkably successful in the first three centuries. Ramsay Macmullen points out that,

prior to the Peace of the Church in 313, the great mass of new members entered under the impetus of this new message, won over both by its proofs and its content. It was a great mass indeed: on the order of half a million in each generation from the end of the first century up to the proclaiming of toleration (the increase was unevenly distributed, and the figure is meant only to suggest the dimensions of growth). No new cult anywhere nearly approached the same success.

This building program culminated in the declaration of Gratian, emperor of Rome from 375 to 383, under the influence of Ambrose, “that there should be only one state-recognized

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5 Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:542. This is not to suggest, of course, that churches met *exclusively* in houses until the fourth century. Indeed, Acts 19:9 says that Paul used a local hall for two years. This is only to say that buildings dedicated exclusively to Christian worship were extremely rare until the fourth century.

orthodox church, and one set of faith – the orthodox dogma. . . . That meant the legal end of the house church."

The process by which the early church became progressively institutionalized and ultimately became the Roman Catholic Church is well understood and will not be restated here. It is enough to acknowledge that, like many Protestants, Organic Church advocates have a prima facie historical warrant for claiming their church model reflects that of the Apostolic Church.

Reformation Roots

Organic Church advocates trace their history in modern times back to Martin Luther. They argue that his reformation was fundamentally a reformation of theology, but that he simply did not take his ideas far enough. Indeed, for them, their ecclesiological principles are embedded in and are in fact the logical extension of the Reformation’s three solas. Thus, Luther succeeded in breaking the Church’s bondage to Rome, but it took later Christians to reinvigorate her in a Second Reformation, which can be attributed to German Pietism. That, they argue, constituted a reformation of the Church’s spirituality. Today, however, the organic church itself is in the beginnings of a Third Reformation, which is a reformation of the Church’s structure. That the reformation of structure is rooted in the reformation of theology can be seen in the emphasis placed on the priesthood of all believers. One of the most serious challenges Organic Church advocates lay against traditional ecclesiology lies in what they call the professionalization of the church. Viola argues as follows:

Remove the pastor and most Protestant churches would be thrown into a panic. Remove the pastor, and Protestantism as we know it would die. The pastor is the dominating focal point, mainstay, and centerpiece of the contemporary church. He is the embodiment of Protestant Christianity.

Again, it is argued at this point that the development of the episcopate actually constituted a devolution of sorts from the Apostles’ ideas. This is not to say that pastors have no function in the church. It is only to say that their role ought not to be so central. While Luther’s churches never made such an argument, some later Protestant leaders did, at least implicitly. John Wesley, for instance, initially had no desire to break with the Episcopal Church, but he did wish to see it reinvigorated. As such, he established “societies”—small, organic fellowships of devoted Christians dedicated to service to one another and to the sharing of their faith. Concerning these societies or “classes,” Snyder says that they,

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8 Ibid., xvi.
9 Ibid., xix.
10 Viola, 106.
11 B. K. Kuiper, *The Church in History* (Grand Rapids: The National Union of Christian Schools, 1964), 290-91. Kuiper also notes that “only converted persons should belong to his societies,” and that he even went so far as to issue “society tickets” conferring membership that had to be renewed quarterly. This type of strict membership requirements is common in organic churches.
were in effect house churches. . . . [They] normally met one evening each week for an hour or so, each person reported on his or her spiritual progress, or on particular needs or problems, and received the support and prayers of the others . . . According to one author it was, in fact, in the class meeting “where the great majority of conversions occurred.” . . . Wesley put one in ten, perhaps one in five, to work in significant ministry and leadership. And who were these people? Not the educated or the wealthy with time on their hands, but laboring men and women, husbands and wives and young folks with little or no training, with spiritual gifts and eagerness to serve . . . The system which emerged gave lie to the argument that you can’t build a church on poor and uneducated folk. Not only did Wesley reach the masses; he made leaders of thousands of them.\textsuperscript{12}

Wesley’s experience, then, seems to vindicate Luther’s doctrine of the priesthood of all believers in its fullest sense. Not only can lay believers lead themselves, but beyond debates over the interpretation of New Testament eldership, the claim has historical precedent.

Luther’s theological reforms, however, did not only suggest the de-professionalization of the Church. Luther found a necessity for three “orders of service.” First was a mass held in Latin, which was the universal language of the time and could thereby be understood by everyone. The second was a German mass, again a public mass and here for the benefit of his own people. Regarding the third service, he writes that it should not be held in public square before everyone. Rather those who want to be earnest Christians and profess the Gospel with words and deeds should register in name and meet somewhere in a house gather to pray, to read, to baptize, to receive the sacrament, and to do other Christian works.\textsuperscript{13}

Unfortunately, Luther never established any such a service but instead regressed to a more formal ecclesiology. Others directly influenced by him, however, did attempt to carry out the project. Casper Schwenkfeld was a German theologian converted to Luther’s ideas about salvation by faith alone and attempted to dissuade Luther’s intention to establish a professional priesthood.\textsuperscript{14} Ultimately he was opposed by Luther as a heretic for his rejection of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist and for his supposed Anabaptist leanings, the latter of which are evident in many of his ideas, including the fellowship of assemblies much like Luther himself had described above. The question naturally arises as to why Luther would oppose the development of such organic models when he had already endorsed them. One commentator in discussing a recently discovered letter of Luther’s addresses this issue and finds the roots of the problem in his rejection of Anabaptism, for “many of his arguments against Anabaptism also

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\textsuperscript{12} Howard Snyder, \textit{The Radical Wesley & Patterns for Church Renewal} (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 53-63.

\textsuperscript{13} Luther, \textit{Vorrede zur Deutschen Messe} “Die Gottesdienste und Messen, die eine rechte evangelische Ordnung erhalten sollten, dürften nicht so öffentlich auf dem Platz vor jedermann gehalten werden. Vielmehr müßten diejenigen, die mit Ernst Christen sein wollen und das Evangelium mit Taten und Worten bekennen, sich mit Namen eintragen und irgendwo in einem Haus versammeln, um zu beten, zu lesen, zu taufen, das Abendmahl zu empfangen und andere christliche Werke zu tun.” Author’s translation. Available online: \url{http://www.stmichael-online.de/vorrede.htm} (Accessed October 13, 2012)

\textsuperscript{14} Simson, 66.
work against those who would set up groups of earnest Christians.”\textsuperscript{15} Schwenkfeld himself set up a variety of such fellowships—indeed, a Schwenkfelder Church even exists today—but he forbid them from establishing a formal church.\textsuperscript{16} Instead, they were to model the ideas Luther suggested regarding the third order of service.

\textit{Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Roots}

As the Reformation principles spread, many other groups began to adopt organic ideas of church governance. Jean de Labadie, for instance, was a French Reformer who ministered in Geneva and Holland. There he sought to establish small fellowships. Soon, however, those meetings were censured in Amsterdam in 1670, and the groups were forced to move again.\textsuperscript{17} His influence did not cease with his immediate followers, though, as one of his students was Philipp Jakob Spener, “the father of German pietism.”

Spener had become a Lutheran pastor in Frankfurt in 1666, and beginning in 1670, he established what he called \textit{collegia pietatis} (schools of piety), which met in homes and emphasized Bible study and prayer. Similarly, his 1675 work \textit{Pia Desideria} (Pious Desires) encouraged “the cottage prayer meeting” to cultivate spirituality among Lutherans.\textsuperscript{18} Unfortunately, the city council of Frankfurt refused to allow his churches to continue meeting in homes (probably in large part to an overreaction to the Anabaptist traditions). He therefore subsumed his fellowships under the established churches and so forbade them from receiving sacraments in that setting. All of this ultimately frustrated him, and he moved away from Frankfurt and started no other groups.\textsuperscript{19}

A final example can be found in the English Dissenters. Claude Brousson, a Huguenot leader, famously sang Psalm 34 just before he was executed. Brousson’s passion found its way to Europe and was caught by David Defoe and the Dissenters, who became in some ways the English counterpart to the Huguenots. Again, they organized themselves into house churches and called themselves “the Church in the Wilderness,” referencing the Israelite wanderings in the desert. Ultimately, Defoe was imprisoned, where he wrote his celebrated story of Robinson Crusoe, which some believe has elements that symbolize his theology of freedom in Christ.\textsuperscript{20}

\textit{Modern Roots}

One of the most important areas that influenced the development of the modern organic church movement was the growth of the world missions movement. As Americans began to develop a denominational structure of Christianity, their churches became more functional in

\begin{footnotes}
\item\textsuperscript{15} Charles Edward White, “‘Concerning Earnest Christians’: A Newly Discovered letter of Martin Luther,” \textit{Currents In Theology And Mission} 10, no. 5 (October 1, 1983): 281.
\item\textsuperscript{16} P. Erb, “The Schwenkfelder Code,” \textit{America} 194, no. 20 (June 5, 2006): 15.
\item\textsuperscript{17} Philip Schaff, \textit{New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge}, s.v. “Labadie.”
\item\textsuperscript{18} Earl E. Cairns, \textit{Christianity through the Centuries}, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 383.
\item\textsuperscript{19} Simson, 70.
\item\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 69.
\end{footnotes}
nature—that is, the Church was conceived as responsible to *do* something.\(^{21}\) Over time, that something was progressively identified with missions, and the Church saw herself as responsible for sending out missionaries into the world to win the world for Christ. This, in turn, led to such events as the formation of the World Council of Churches in 1947 and the International Missionary Council in 1961. The discussions brought about by this emphasis ultimately resulted in a different notion of what it means to be “the Church” that has come to be called the *missional church*. On this view, “mission is no longer understood primarily in functional terms as something the church *does*, as is the case for the [functional] church. Rather it is understood in terms of something the church is, as something that is related to its nature.”\(^{22}\) The result of this view is that the Church does not send out missionaries; rather, she sends out herself. “The Church” is not an organized body of fifty to five-thousand members that commissions professional missionaries. Rather, it is a society or fellowship of believers living out the Gospel in the world.\(^{23}\)

A second aspect of the denominational structure of American Christianity became important—namely, the free-church model of church governance, where people joined churches on a voluntary basis.\(^{24}\) When these two streams combined, the result was a view of the church as a voluntary fellowship of people, and that fellowship constitutes both the body and mission of Christ. As such, the Church does not “send out” missionaries and invite people into the Church; rather, she lives in the world and invites people to share in her mission of being the Body of Christ.

Modern movements that have taken this view are too numerous to count. The Brethren Movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Britain’s Restoration of the House Church Movement, D.O.V.E. Fellowship, Church Multiplication Associates, and even parachurch organizations such as YWAM and Campus Crusade for Christ each embody some or all aspects of the organic house-church movement. Moreover, major Protestant denominations such as the Southern Baptist Convention have even begun to embrace this movement. The SBC has a wide variety of organizations dedicated to planting house and organic churches. For instance, the North American Mission Board is developing an organization called Send North America, which is focused on planting churches in fifty urban areas throughout the country. In Atlanta, the goal is to plant several thousand house churches and missional communities. Send Atlanta also works closely with a local organization of three Southern Baptist associations called Urban Atlanta.

\(^{21}\) This view stands in contrast to the established church view, in which the Church is conceived primarily in terms of the location in which God’s activity on earth centers, as in Catholic and other Protestant Church sponsored states. That is not to say that missions is absent from established churches or that functional churches do not see themselves as the place where God is acting. The issue here is the position of such views in the notion of the identity of the Church. See Craig Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church: A Community Led by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 73-84.

\(^{22}\) Craig, 85-86.

\(^{23}\) Missional churches, which organic churches would be classified as, still may commission “missionaries.” Such ministries, however, are incidental to the church’s identity; or better, they are simply an extension of what the church already is.

\(^{24}\) This view became so pervasive that it became encoded in the U.S. Constitution’s First Amendment. Since there is no State established church, then churches are necessarily voluntary bodies.
Church Planting. UACP is interested exclusively in developing house churches and missional communities and provides extensive training and support for those who feel called to that field.

CONCLUSION

The preceding analysis has sought to show that the modern house church movement is neither a new, unprecedented phenomenon nor is it without deep conceptual roots in the fundamental principles of the Protestant reformation. This is particularly important in light of the fact that a great deal of discussions about “house churches,” both in popular and academic settings, focus on the Chinese underground church, which can leave one with the impression of the movement as a foreign import.

One should hasten to add, however, that the historical examples presented above are not examples of the modern house church movement, especially with its emphasis on organic, full participation of the body. Each of the examples offered above had more or less in common with today’s movement. What they all have in common is an attempt to work “outside” the traditional church setting in small fellowships, usually under lay leadership, for the purpose of developing deeper community and spirituality. So while it would be anachronistic to call these previous movements “organic churches,” their precedent is still worth noting.25

It is hoped that this brief survey has offered support for the call for more substantive research into the history and popularity of this church model. As recently as 2008, Barna surveys showed that some 80% of Americans regarded themselves as deeply spiritual,26 but another survey the same year showed that nearly 40% attended church services once a year or less.27 There is, then, a large disconnect between American spirituality and church attendance. The degree to which—if any—the organic, house church model can reach people’s interests is one that deserves closer study. History seems to suggest that such movements flourish among a populace tired of institutional religion and seeking a deeper, more meaningful faith. To that end, the history and future of the house church movement could well prove to have important impact on American spirituality in the near future.

25 In this way, such a study is perhaps analogous to historical surveys of relatively recent theological schools (e.g., dispensationalism), in which elements of the system can be found throughout Church history, even if they were all so systematized much later.


SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


