House Church and Mission: The Importance of Household Structures in Early Christianity. By Roger W. Gehring. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004, vii + 408 pp., $29.95 hardback.

Since the birth of the Church, believers have always gathered together in private homes for fellowship, worship, evangelism, and teaching. Though there have been other New Testament scholars to take up the pen and write about the significance of house churches in the Apostolic Church, most of their writings have focused on the architecture of the homes and on the social and theological implications of the house church. Gehring, while taking into account previous scholarship, offers a fresh perspective on the topic in that he addresses the missiological significance of the house church.

House Church and Mission is the English translation of Gehring's original publication of *Hausgemeinde und Mission* (Brunnen Verlag Giessen 2000, Bibelwissenschaftliche Monographien (BWM) Brand 9), which was the edited version of his Th.D. dissertation *Hausgemeinde und Mission: Von Jesus bis Paulus*. The author is an Adjunct Professor at George fox Evangelical Seminary in Portland, Oregon and has served on staff with Campus Crusade for Christ since 1972 at Arizona State University, the Free University in Berlin, and Justus Liebig University in Giessen, Germany. Despite the fact that this work is primarily based upon a doctoral dissertation, it is a very readable though lengthy work.

The book is divided into six chapters, several appendixes, an extensive bibliography, and three indexes. Chapter one is comprised of a literature review of the

history of scholarship regarding the subject of house churches in the New Testament. Gehring's thesis is that his work "intends to examine to what degree the social life, the organizational and leadership structures, and the ecclesiological self-understanding of early Christians were patterned after the household model" (p. 22) He clearly notes that his methodology includes both an exegetical-theological and a sociohistorical approach, but is quick to qualify that though the sociological approach is an important supplement to social- and literary-historical methodology, "it dare not be given absolute status" (p. 24). Since there are widely differing definitions of what constitutes a house church, Gehring concludes his introductory chapter with his simple, yet defining characteristics. "A *house church* is a group of Christians that meets in a private home. A *local church* consists of all the Christians that gather at a geographically definable location (e.g., town or city). The terms 'local church; and 'house church' refer to the same group only if there is just one single house church gathering at that specific location. We will use the term 'whole local church' or 'whole church at one location' to refer to the whole church in one locality. This term already implies a plurality of individual house churches for that location. The term 'universal church' will, as usual, be reserved for the worldwide body of Christians" (p. 27).

Chapter two examines the use of houses in the ministries of Jesus and the disciples before Easter. In conjunction with Jesus' synagogue ministry, Gehring also shows how the house of Peter in Capernaum was a place of assembly, instruction, healing, and operational base for outreach throughout the "evangelical triangle" (*das evangelische Dreieck*), the areas in and around Capernaum, Chorazin, and Bethsaida. In this chapter Gehring points out that Jesus was both an itinerant preacher but also led a

sedentary ministry at least temporarily in Capernaum. Gehring notes that "The house becomes in this case a base of operation for the itinerant ministry, from which Jesus went out on evangelistic trips and to which he again returned" (p. 41). His conclusion is that "Jesus may have undertaken a Galilean village-to-village (or house-to-house) mission, in which houses, households, and sedentary followers of Jesus played a role similar to that which they played in Capernaum" (p. 43). This example modeled by the Lord is continued with the ministry of the sending of the Twelve and later the seventy. Gehring notes that "the mission instructions indicate that the pre-Easter house mission, as Jesus and his disciples practiced it, was likely the embryonic form of house-to-house missional outreach and church development practiced after Easter" (p. 58).

Chapter three examines the post-Easter use of houses in the Jerusalem Church. In conjunction with the Jerusalem Church meeting in the temple courts, Gehring believes that they also gathered together in houses throughout the city for worship, fellowship, the Lord's Supper, and prayer. Within this chapter, he also notes the role of houses in the Antioch Church as well as the outreach of Peter. Gehring writes, "Because of the small size of house churches, it was possible to maintain a family-like atmosphere and practice brotherly love in a very personal and concrete way. . . . Even through the evidence is not as conclusive for the primitive church in Jerusalem as it is for the Pauline communities, here as well we can assume that the ancient *oikos* served as a source of evangelistic contacts, with its built-in network of relationships reaching far beyond the immediate family to servants, friends, clientele, and business associates" (p. 117).

The fourth chapter addresses the use of houses in Pauline missional outreach. Following his usual literary and historical analysis of the topic, Gehring addresses the

cities with "demonstrable house churches": Philippi, Thessalonica; Corinth, Cenchrea, Ephesus, Rome, Colossae, and Laodicea. In this chapter he also examines the notion of a plurality of house churches within one church of a particular geographical area, worship in house churches, missionary work, and leadership structures and organizational formation of house churches. The small size of the house churches attributed to the fact 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" (p. 227). Since the use of the house was a significant part of Paul's strategy, Gehring sees Paul's approach to reaching entire house-holds with the gospel, by first reaching the householder, as a key to the overall strategy.

Chapter five is devoted to understanding the influence of *oikos* structures. Here Gehring primarily draws upon the household code in Colossians and Ephesians and various passages in the Pastorals and 2 and 3 John for evidence of the significance of the kith and kin networks found within the first century homes. There is a close relationship between the family and the New Testament house church. In this chapter, he notes, "In their families and in their house churches, they are expected to be an illustration of order and an example of quiet civil loyalty and faithfulness inwardly and outwardly." Referencing, the Pastorals, Gehring continues that this behavior makes them "effective in their missional outreach (cf. 1 Tim 2:4; 3:15; Titus 3:8)" (p. 266). This chapter is concluded with the reminder that the house churches functioned also as a body to aid itinerants. They provided food, clothing, and lodging to assist missionaries in preparation for their future travels (cf. 3 John 6).

The final chapter of this work discusses the ecclesiological and missional function and significance of house churches. After discussing the architectural, socioeconomic, and ecclesiological significance of the house churches, Gehring concludes his work by briefly addressing the notion of the house church model for the contemporary Church. Though he rightly concludes that it would be wrong to attempt to recreate the world of the first century wherever the local church exists, nevertheless, he does believe that we can learn much from the house churches of the New Testament.

There are numerous strengths of this work. First, the author is to be commended on producing a work on house churches that is primarily exegetically-driven, rather than driven by contemporary practices. Gehring is a New Testament scholar who clearly subscribes to the historical reliability of many passages of Scripture that other scholars deny. As a missiologist, I have studied many house churches that (like many traditionally structured churches) have sacrificed a healthy biblical ecclesiology for contemporary trends and personal desires. Though other authors have produced ecclesiologies and theologies regarding house churches (e.g., Steve Atkerson, ed., *Toward a House Church Theology*, Robert Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in Their Cultural Settings*), Gehring's work appears to be the first exhaustive exegetical and academic treatment of the topic. He clearly documents his work with numerous footnotes and a sixty page bibliography.

Second, and closely related to the aforementioned strength, Gehring attempts to be thoroughly biblical in his understanding of house churches in the New Testament. Granted, he does support many of his arguments from archeological, historical, literary,

and sociological evidence, but the Scriptures are his starting place and primary point of reference.

Third, rather than beginning with Acts and the Pauline epistles, Gehring shows the connection between the role of the house in the ministry of Jesus and how it later influenced the post-Easter churches. Many are quick to overlook the pattern established in the gospel records, and immediately jump to the evidence of house churches that were planted outside of Jerusalem.

The one major limitation of this work is that Gehring seems to make certain assumptions about the existence and function of house churches from passages of Scripture whereby the conclusions are speculative at best. Though his logic is usually tight, I would feel more comfortable with silence than speculation. There is plenty of evidence in the biblical texts clearly to support the place and role of house churches in the spread of the gospel.

For example, though an interesting point, Gehring believes that due to the *oikos* formula, "it was typical of the Pauline missional approach in any given city to initially target individuals from higher social levels. In this way Paul was able to win homeowners, along with their entire households, for the gospel and to set up a base of operations in their house for local and regional mission" (p.178). Though we do have evidence of men and women of means with churches meeting in their homes (e.g., Lydia, Philemon), to make draw this conclusion from the texts seems presumptuous.

Also, I would disagree with the author's semantics that the Apostle Paul practiced "'cell planting' (*Schwerpunktmission*), believing that "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" (p. 179, 180). Gehring's contemporary terminology leaves the reader with the impression that these "cells" were not churches, but rather the church in *embryonic* form. Either the Apostle planted churches or he did not plant churches. Though Paul would sometimes return to visit, send others to visit, or write letters, he never considered these local bodies of believers as something less than the church in their particular area. Though elders would later be appointed and sanctification would continue until glorification, Paul planted fully indigenous churches that lacked nothing in Christ.

Overall, this is an excellent work showing the natural wedding between ecclesiology and missions. Gehring has done a fantastic job with such a neglected topic in both New Testament and missiological studies. Due to the heavily scholastic treatment of the subject, this work would best be used as a text in graduate and doctoral studies.

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