SO YOU WANT TO START A HOUSE CHURCH

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Category: John Fifteen

Article # one: **Intro**

So you want to start a house church. Could be a good idea. But first....

Perhaps it would be wise to inquire of the Lord Jesus, "Lord, I (we) would like to start a house church. Do You approve? Will You give me (us) permission to initiate this work?"

A house gathering having the Lord's approval will be much more rewarding than the one that doesn't. Believe me, you don't want to get involved in something He hasn't birthed (through whoever). You don't want to waste more years. More than wanting the Lord to bless your good intention, you want to bless the Lord by your obedience. Obedience can sometimes mean accepting a *no*. (For me, a non-reply is a *no*.)

Much is done out of 'religious ambition' (a term I picked up somewhere) and there is a huge difference between religious ambition and obedience. Obedience is walking the path Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, has, in His sovereignty, placed before us. Religious ambition is following a path of our own making, noble or otherwise.

This is not to discourage, but to caution. It is quite possible "the head of the church" could approve of you starting (or attending) a house gathering. It certainly is more in accord to His Word than the evangelical way, and has the potential to be much more edifying.

Assuming you feel you have been given the 'green light' to begin this new work, I highly recommend caution. A mistake at the beginning may not be easily corrected. I repeat, it's much easier to get it right at the beginning than to correct later. Change often causes injury and strife.

PLEASE NOTE: I offer my service.

I will come and help the small group intent on establishing a house church - assuming they are of the opinion the Lord Jesus has commissioned them to so do. This I will do at my own expense. Of course I must qualify that....

I will, upon invitation and after sufficient dialog, assist the small group intending to start a house gathering AS THE HOLY SPIRIT SO DIRECTS ME. (I think it is safe to surmise only those having read much of *John Fifteen* would contact me.)

You see, that's how I try to live out my christianity – under the governorship of the Holy Spirit. I won't

go where He does not lead. That's how I obey Jesus – by being sensitive to the Holy Spirit whom He has sent. My function would be to come for a time, perhaps 4-6 weeks (Anyone out there have a Class A motor home for sale?), and then leave again, transferring the full responsibility of the house church onto the group.

PLEASE NOTE: I am not suggesting a group needs me or anyone else to start a house church. "My grace is sufficient for you." I would be thoroughly blessed just knowing insights from this series of articles could be beneficial to anyone daring this step of obedience to the prompting of the Lord Jesus.

C h a l l e n g e : *Jesus said to Peter at the time of His arrest, "Shall I not drink the cup which My Father has given Me?" Soon after He could say, "I* have drank *the cup which My Father has given Me." May you one day be able to declare, "I have drank the cup which my Father has given me." This is only possible to the one submissive to the Holy Spirit.*

P r a y e r : *Lord Jesus, on our own we will fail. But with You all things are possible. Help us to drink deeply of the cup the Father has given. And anoint this article with Your Holy Spirit.* (And hopefully the reader says, "Amen!")

Article # two: **Me, Us**

To know what works for a group, determine what works for you the individual.

For a house church to be successful the group must regulate themselves in the same manner an individual is to regulate him/herself. This is simple and this is important and this is the topic of this article.

The answer to "How should *we* do this?" is the same as "How should *I* do this?" The answer to "What does the Lord want *us* to do?" is probably the same as "What does the Lord want *me* to do?" An example....

Some have an aversion to organization, perhaps a backlash against the OC (organized church). *Should the house church adapt this same attitude?* The answer is the same for *us* as it is for *me*. God is immutable. Holiness doesn't allow a double-standard. Wisdom doesn't have opposing solutions. All are called to build on the words of our Christ. God's ways do not change when one becomes two, when two becomes three, when three becomes a multitude. Because He changes not, neither do we.

Should you the individual be disorganized? Of course not. Therefore, applying the above logic, a group of individuals should not be disorganized. The OC did not invent organization. The opposite to organized is disorganized. God seems to be a very organized person. It's hard to think of Jesus being disorganized. Perhaps organization isn't so bad after all. Organization should not be a god to be served but an instrument to utilize. The goal is to tap into the order of the Holy Spirit. *Lord, should we meet at seven or eight? Tuesdays or Sundays? Here or there?*

Another question: *Should we, as a group, be casual and spontaneous?* The answer is the same as the answer to the question, *Should* I *be casual and spontaneous, go wherever, do whatever, whenever?* We take the *me* answer and apply it to us.

Jesus was not casual. And Jesus certainly was not frivolous. He set His face like a flint. He had a cup to drink, a course to complete, a job to do. The individual is His disciple, serious because He is, focused because He is, determined because He is. 'My' calling is to pursue Christ, my passion pleases Him. Likewise *we* are His disciples, *we* are to be focused, and *our* passion pleases Him. A group cannot gather unto Christ casually, we can only be casual when He is far from our thoughts, more infatuated with each other than with Him. Save casual for heaven. We live in a war zone. Planet earth needs earnest warriors.

One more: *What makes a house church successful?* Only a healthy attachment to the Vine makes the christian healthy, and only a healthy attachment to the Vine will make a house church healthy.

C h a l l e n g e : *Is Jesus lord in fact or lord symbolically? Submitting to the leadership of the Holy Spirit is submitting to the lordship of Jesus in fact.*

P r a y e r : *Father, may we be good for each other. May we each be warmed by the glow of our love for Your Son. Father, anoint these words.* (And hopefully the reader responds, "Amen!")

Article # three: **Agendas**

Even in a small group there will be at least one with an agenda, maybe two or more. Is it wrong to have an agenda? Well, that depends on the agenda. The Father had an agenda when He sent His Son. Jesus had an agenda when He went to the cross.

T e v y e : *On the other hand.....* (Fiddler On the Roof)

The religiously ambitious also have an agenda. So do controllers.

An agenda is wrong when contrary to the agenda of the Holy Spirit. Such agendas are usually *secret* agendas, motivations of the ignoble 'flesh', or even a well-intentioned heart.

If 'my' agenda is *His* agenda my life will be successful. If 'our' agenda is *His* agenda our house gathering will be successful.

Most have mixed agendas. Sure we want to love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength. But we also have our religious ambitions to fulfill, egos to be stroked. Many still want god *me* to rule and reign over 'me'. When ten people gather ten egos gather, ten mixed baggages congregate, concealed agendas compete for supremacy. What hope do 'we' have?

Same hope as 'I' have. "With God all things are possible." "I can do all things through Christ."

Only one agenda will bring bountiful fruit.... *to know Him*. Both 'my' and 'our' agenda must be *Him*. Branch/branches abiding in the Vine.

Most of us have had various agendas. Religious ambitions seem okay simply because they're religious. Gotta do. Gotta build. Gotta please. Gotta lead. Gotta accomplish. Gotta learn.

Two sisters with two opposite mindsets: Martha, a spinning top, and Mary, a relaxed teddy bear. Spinning Top resented Ted. Here she was scrambling around the kitchen preparing something real nice for her guests while lazy sister sat at the feet of Jesus, doing nothing but listening. *This just ain't right!,* thinks Spinning Top, and asks Jesus to give Teddy a scolding. But Jesus commended Mary and scolded Martha.

Down through church history there has been Martha*s* and Mary*s.* Who rules most of the time? Martha*s.* Who loves Jesus more? Mary*s*. Who works hardest? Spinning Top*s*. Who gets the most done? Relaxed Teddy Bear*s.* Who lays up treasures on earth? Martha*s*. Treasures in heaven? Mary*s*. Who are the touchiest? Martha*s*. Who are the more peaceful? Mary*s.* Who are in the majority? Spinners, by far. Who get their prayers answered? Bears. Who have the most unbelief? Martha*s*. Who will hear the Master say, "Well done, good and faithful servant"? Mary*s*.

Why do Spinning Top*s* spin? Because they don't want to sit at the feet of Jesus. Sitting at the feet of Jesus causes *me* to shrink. Can't have that.

Spinning Top preaching: "Gotta do! Gotta build! Gotta accomplish!" Teddy Bear preaching: "Isn't He lovely! Worthy is the Lamb!"

A house church must get it right. From the start. Getting it right now is much easier than trying to get it right later.

Starting over is better than straightening out. Repentance will bring the gathering back to the starting line. What does the starting line look like? Like this: Jesus is Lord, the Holy Spirit leads, Mary*s* sitting at the feet of Jesus.

A small group with the sole agenda of gathering unto Jesus will be powerful. Very powerful. Very fruitful. What stunts the christian's growth is *another agenda*. The problem of evangelicalism is *another agenda*. If a house church isn't doing well it's because of *another agenda*.

C h a l l e n g e : *Be brave and ask yourself, "What has been my agenda?"*

P r a y e r : *Father, as the Husbandsman, we invite You to prune. As the Potter, we invite You to mold. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

Article # four: **Leadership**

Larry Jones: *When a Christian hears the word "leader" he ought not to think of a man, a group of men, church staff, a pastor, an elder, or denominational officers. He ought to think of Jesus Christ.* (The Way It Is)

Church leadership has been turned into a complicated issue. Let's look at Hebrews 13:7: *Remember*

those who rule over you. A denominational line of reason: Hebrews 13:7 proves a) there are rulers, obviously us, and b) we are to be obeyed. *Ahem!* A few questions: Who defines who these leaders are? Suppose one disagrees with what the 'ruler' teaches/preaches/dictates?

Example: Ruler/Pastor Whoever insists you address him as *Pastor* Whoever. You know there is no Bible precedent, and you feel strongly such a dictate is an insult to Christ, your true pastor. Should you obey? (No!) Would obeying such a decree be disobedient to Christ? (Yes!) Should you feel free to tell others of your decision to place the word over traditional thought? (Certainly!)

There is an assumption (by the author of Hebrews) that the leader will only speak the truths of God. Submitting to those truths is submitting to the Lord. And it is assumed the reader would never knowingly obey an invalid word. We are responsible to the Lord Jesus to make a judgment to obey or ignore an elder/leader.

Let's look again at Hebrews 13:7, this time the NIV: *Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their life and imitate their faith.*

Remember your leaders..... Support them. *Who spoke the word of God to you.....* A leader speaks the word of God. A leader is whosoever, whoever speaks the word of God. That's what true "leaders" do. It is the Word you are obeying, i.e., the Lord, and not man. One becomes a leader by speaking the word of God (as the Holy Spirit so directs). Do not "remember" those who do *not* speak the word of God. *Consider the outcome of their life and imitate their faith.....* Do they love Jesus? Do they reverence His words? Are their lives exemplary? If yes, imitate their lives of commitment and faithfulness, obey as they obey, serve as they serve.

Do not be confused; you have one leader only. Jesus said so. "One is your Teacher (Leader), the Christ." (Mat. 23:9) Leaders are under-leaders, leaders under Christ, those Christ leads through, teaches through. 'Behind' the canvass is an artist to be appreciated. 'Behind' the leader is a Leader to be honored.

A sister in the Lord admonishes the group to practice humility by considering others better than oneself. You know serving others has never been your strength. Should you obey even though this sister has no official position? (Yes!) Would 'obeying' her be obeying "your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you"? (Yes!) Would ignoring her words be disobedience to Christ? (Certainly!)

Let's look at *elders*. An elder is one who has been a christian longer than most, and hopefully more established in the ways of the Lord. This makes him/her more accountable, just as older brothers and sisters in a family are more accountable than the younger.

There are elders who are good guys and elders who are bad guys. A true and faithful elder will always point to our Elder Brother, and cause obedience and focus to be to Him. An *unfaithful* elder will usurp the governorship of the Holy Spirit, and draw disciples unto himself. It undoubtedly was elders who led the church of Galatia astray, turning them from Christ to the law of Moses. Paul did

not praise the Galatians for obeying “those who rule over” them, but scolded them severely.

In a marriage, the husband is the head of the wife under Christ. He has been given a position, an office. No such office has been given to elders in the church. In a family, mom and dad have been given a place of authority. Again, no such authority has been placed upon an elder (or pastor, prophet, teacher, etc.) An elder could be compared to an elder sibling. Considering him to be more than a sibling creates major problems.

A most important question to be decided by a house church is: WHO RULES? *Who rules?* is a crucial question. You must get it right - from the beginning. *Christ rules via the Holy Spirit via whoever the Spirit should choose on any given occasion.* As Christ rules the individual through the individual, he likewise rules the group through the group. Yes, He probably would choose to speak through/teach through/direct through the elder brothers and sisters more than the younger. If He truly is Lord of the house church, *all* will bow to His prerogatives, and none should be assuming.

Elders, because they are more influential, have the capacity to do much good. And harm. The young in Christ will not be followed and therefore can't do much injury. But elders have the potential to lead astray, to draw disciples unto themselves, to pass on their idols, to use the group to fulfill their religious ambitions. A faithful elder will protect the lordship of Christ and the governorship of the Holy Spirit. He will never presume an authority he does not have.

In my opinion..... a healthy house church looks something like this: The group rules itself by *consensus.* (By consensus the group determines the will of the Lord Jesus - who is quite involved in the affairs of the group.) No one has an official capacity over another. A ROTATING coordinator *may be* selected as a practical means of determining the will of the group. The onus is upon *all* to make the house church a success. All bear the responsibility. Hopefully there will be one or more elders in the group who will give oversight. Giving oversight is being alert to warn the group when the group is going astray. (Going astray is becoming fixed on something or someone other than Jesus.) Elders are to influence by word and example; since most of what we learn is non-verbal, leading by example is a logical Bible decree.

You may find it interesting to know that the words *elder* and *elders* are not mentioned in Paul's letter to the Romans. Why? Obviously elders were not recognized by Paul as possessing authority. What else can one conclude? Again, *what else can one conclude?* And did you know those two words, *elder* and *elders*, are likewise absent from his two instructional letters to the Corinthians? Nor can they be found in Paul's scolding letter to the Galatians. Nor in his letters to the Ephesians, the Philippians, the Colossians, and the Thessalonians. The point is.....

Perhaps the role of the elder has been overplayed in house churches.

But Paul did have much to say about "one another" ministry. And his letters indicate he had a *rule-by-consensus* mentality. Notice his letters were addressed to the *entire* church. If you were affiliated with one of those churches you would have been equally responsible with all others to judge Paul's

comments and instructions. Still not convinced? Read again the words of Christ Himself to the seven churches (Revelation, chapters 2 and 3) always directed to the entire church.

C h a l l e n g e : *A house church, like a marriage and a family, is an impossibility without Christ. You know, however, all things are possible with God. Look to God.*

P r a y e r : *Father, most of us have at least some fear of man. I acknowledge publicly a fear of man. Please deliver us all. Redeem us from this curse. And Father, bless this article! In His name!* (And hopefully the reader says, "Amen!")

Article # five: **Building On Rock**

So let's say, for discussion purposes, you feel led of the Lord to start a house church.

First of all, it should be said *you are allowed* to start a house church. You do not need permission from anyone to do what the Lord bids you to do. To seek permission could insult your Father. It would be like the little girl given permission to go to a party asking the neighbors to endorse Daddy's permission.

J E S U S : *Whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock.* (Mat. 7:24)

Paraphrase: *If you do what I say you will be successful.*

If you build your house church on Bible principles it will prosper. If you don't it won't. The group builds in the same manner the individual builds. (You may want to read again a previous article, *Me, Us*.) There are some *musts* applicable to the group determined to have healthy christianity.

First and foremost, Jesus *must* be the focus of the gathering. In His name do the people congregate. One might think this a simple matter but it's not. Jesus has a way of being forgotten, ignored, slighted. We protest the world taking Christ out of christmas, and are oblivious to the folly and betrayal of removing Christ from christianity. There is an ugly thing within that resists Jesus, and acknowledging this enemy helps define the battle, the real battle, of life on earth. The Christ-versus-self and Christ-versus-man and Christ-versus-tradition clash will extend into any house church. He who wins this battle wins all.

The group cannot "change the subject." How easy to slide from Christ-centeredness to something less. There are hundreds of subjects christians find fascinating - inner healing, televangelists, politics, Bible prophecies, evangelicalism, house churches, Pastor Whoever, controversial doctrines, 'new' teachings, upcoming and past conferences, and many etceteras. The group staying on track - Mary*s* sitting at His feet, Mary*s* giving due homage and appreciation - will be blessed for their tenacity. (Believe me, tenacity is what it takes to keep Jesus as lord of the group's christianity.)

A second *must:* The group *must* agree to bow to the leadership of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit can

never become merely emblematic. Since He is a person He should be treated as one. Since He is special, He is worthy of reverence. All should courteously attempt to discern what the Spirit is saying. "I think *this*" or "I think *that*" is the language of self. "I sense the Lord is saying such-and-such" and "I discern the Holy Spirit is telling us we should do it this way or at that time" is the speech of one subject to the Holy Spirit. The fact there will be mistakes discerning His will does not diminish the importance of trying to hear what He is saying. It's the intentionality Jesus will bless.

A third *must:* The Bible *must* be embraced as authority. So few do. And to further complicate life, all assume they do, such the heart's ability to deceive. Nonetheless the Bible must always take precedence over tradition. (This calls for a serious, conscious, determined effort.)

A desire to understand and obey the Bible is an indicator Christ is lord. Resistance indicates a resistance to Christ. The assembly built upon the sayings of Christ will stand. The collective fruit will be plentiful.

Caution: Be wary of the one, Bible in hand and finger pointing, on a mission to straighten everyone out. This 'mission' can be another deterrent, another way to "change the subject." While it is healthy to be seekers of truth, it must be understood truth will never be fully realized. At best, a group of ten is ten attaining more truth than they had yesterday. I am not in full agreement on every subject with any acquaintance. And neither are you. In a group of ten not two could find complete agreement. Total biblical accuracy is an impossible goal for any group. *More of Him must be the communal ambition.* Again, *More of Him must be the goal.* Nothing less. Truth will be added as Jesus is glorified. Praise has a way of opening the eyes of understanding.

A review of above (what I consider to be) essentials:

1. Jesus is central.
2. The Holy Spirit is lord.
3. The Bible is authority.

A fourth element: Officialdom, an administrative system whereby an official officiates (pastor, elder, group leader) *must* be outlawed. Officialdom, the bedrock and grief of evangelicalism, must be forbidden because Jesus forbade it.

J E S U S : *The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those who exercise authority over them are called "benefactors". But not so among you.* (Luke 22:25,26)

Clearly Jesus forbids some in His church to "exercise lordship over," "*exercise authority over*," others in His church. The more gifted are not to direct the less gifted. Feed, yes. Influence, certainly. Direct, no. His church is not to mimic the world. Christ rules His.

F r a n k A. V i o l a : *Endemic to functionally oriented churches is the mutual responsibility and collegial interplay of the various members as they listen to the Lord together and affirm each other in their Spirit-*

endowed gifts. (Who Is Your Covering?)

The earliest assemblies governed themselves by consensus. Undoubtedly there were elders, mature men who had deeper insights than most; their place was to persuade (not coerce) the group to accept a certain direction or certain truths. That's the way Jesus operated - He persuaded... or tried to. Paul's letters were attempts to persuade the assemblies to behave responsibly. Peter, John and James reasoned with, did not dictate to, those under their influence.

We are accustomed to an official in the assembly supervising the group, and this custom is hard to abdicate. But you must if you hope to build a house church on the Word. You have to be willing to "be transformed by the renewing of your mind" by soaking that mind in Bible perspective.

J E S U S : *Who is greater, he who sits at the table, or he who serves? Is it not he who sits at the table? Yet I am among you as the One who serves.* (Luke 22:27)

The pharisees are a religious prototype of those who sat "at the table." They were officers, as is Pastor Whoever. Officers are not servants recognized by the towel around their waist, but enforcers identified by a uniform (a suit-and-tie within evangelicalism is often a uniform), expecting compliance. Christ's words emphasize He has not appointed officers to govern His church. Bureaucracy needs to be outlawed in your assembly. Peter says it well:

P e t e r : *All of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility.* (1Peter 5:5)

To one another. Submissive, not obedient.

F r a n k A. V i o l a : *Subjection is an attitude; obedience is an action. Subjection is absolute; obedience is relative. Subjection is unconditional; obedience is conditional. Subjection is an internal matter of the heart; obedience is an external matter of conduct.* (Who Is Your Covering?)

Another review:

1. Christ is central.
2. The Holy Spirit is lord.
3. The Bible is authority.
4. The group self-governs by consensus.

Number five must: The house church must be supported, continually, by prayers of faith. The power of the group, its protection and its harvest, will be relative to collective prayer.

While everyone in attendance is a potential blessing, so is he and she a potential problem. Ten people in a group are ten 'me's, ten people far from finished, ten with various baggages. Some may be controllers or incessant talkers, some less than teachable. Maintaining peace and unity by advanced prayer is easier than fixing relationships gone sour or reversing bad situations.

While your house church will advance no further than the prayer supporting it, it will likewise go as far as the supporting prayer. In other words, prayer won't go to waste. In other words, you can better the quality of your gathering by simply increasing prayer.

The marriage having both spouses focused on the Lord will be successful. But without vigilance of prayer intimacy could degrade into enmity; how often that happens. Likewise the house church; if not undergirded in continuous prayer it could lose focus. Losing focus is losing protection. (If focus on Christ cannot be regained it may as well fold.)

Again:

1. Christ is central.
2. The Holy Spirit is lord.
3. The Bible is authority.
4. The group self-governs by consensus.
5. Prayer, prayer, prayer.

One more must: There must be a heavy emphasis on praise and worship. You want to experience, during every gathering, the manifested Presence of God. You want tears to flow, repentance to come, quality decisions made, lives transformed. You want to witness the supernatural, the miraculous. You want pentecost. This will come with quality praise unto our precious redeemer.

Praise is not only relative to the passion of the moment, but to the dedication of one's life. Lives of faithfulness are much more potent than lives of carelessness. How the group lives out their months and years will determine the collective purity and power of praise.

Pray for a gifted instrumentalist, perhaps more than one. Perhaps some in the group could meet separately to familiarize themselves with Christ-centered worship songs, old and new.

So once more:

1. Christ is central.
2. The Holy Spirit is lord.
3. The Bible is authority.
4. The group self-governs by consensus.
5. Prayer, prayer, prayer.
6. Praise and worship.

There. Six (what I consider to be) essentials to ensure a prosperous assemblage. These six should be emphasized at the first; it is easier to stay on a preferred path than trying to redirect to that path later.

Your agenda should be increase. You want this meeting to be better than the last, and the next purer

yet. Continual increase is possible, for every individual, for every group.

I also have a few etceteras - not musts, just practical considerations. That's the next article.

C h a l l e n g e : You are on your way to heaven. You will soon be there. Forever. This little time on earth is a privilege not to reoccur. Time on earth is a responsibility and an opportunity. Time here will determine the quality of your eternity there. So praise Jesus and the Father with all that is within in this brief moment of time on planet earth. Convey an attitude of gratitude. You are an example, an influence. Your passion will be effectual in the extension and maintenance of God's kingdom.

P r a y e r : *Help us, Father. Help us, Lord, to live for You through Jesus Christ. Make us desperate. May we honor You by laying down our toys. By renouncing distractions. By turning off the television. Help us get serious about that that matters. And anoint this article. In Jesus' name.* (And hopefully the reader says, "Amen!")

Article # six: **A Few Etceteras**

The following suggestions are simply that.... suggestions. They are not *musts*, just practical recommendations deserving prayerful consideration (i.e., to be placed under the lordship of the Holy Spirit). So here we go....

Hold your meeting sunday mornings. (You may have more than one per week.)

The Bible allows us to consider a day of the week special if we so desire (Rom. 14:5,6), and most christians have opted sunday as their special day. Sundays are usually the most convenient time to gather, and mornings are the freshest part of the day. So why not sunday mornings?

Do not cater to those who attach themselves to the evangelical system by choosing a time convenient to them. You are creating an alternative, not a supplement. Establishing sunday morning meetings is drawing a line in the sand. Jesus likes lines in the sand. (*"Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve."* Josh. 24:15)

Do not follow someone's program, study manual, or how-to book. The Father wants His children to 'grow up' and not always rely on the revelations of others. Jesus has something unique for your group. He wants to teach/admonish/guide/encourage the gathering through the gathering. Giving yourselves over to a program, except by His decree, could be removing yourself from His governorship. Your loss will be huge.

Be very hesitant to enter into an association with other groups. Don't join the "National Association of House Churches" (just kidding, no such thing.... is there?) or anything similar. Do not let your security come from being attached to something grand. You don't need a spiritual 'umbrella'; you

already have the best - Jesus. Don't come under others, don't rule over others, don't rule each other.

Your house church is not playing house. It's the real thing, requiring maturity and determination. And protection! - protection from controllers itching to keep you 'safe', to be your 'spiritual covering', to swell their ranks. (To many, big is good and small is shameful. Not so.)

Give time for each in the group to minister to the group. All have at least one of the Ephesians 4:11 gifts "for the equipping of the saints" and "for the edifying of the body of Christ." (Please read Evangelicalism Examined, in the series, Leave or Stay? and chapter three of The Way It Is.) How can the saints exercise their gift unless given sufficient time? This is certainly not suggesting taking turns, nor equal time for all - the Holy Spirit doesn't work that way. Submit this matter unto the Lord Jesus Christ, "the head of the (your?) church."

Don't see others as they now are, or as they perceive themselves to be, but what they can become. See their enormous potential. Expectations are vacuums to be filled - if your expectations for your colleagues are lofty chances are they will fulfill those expectations; paltry expectations are an impediment.

In your midst is a powerful spiritual army in the making. Chances are there is an effectual evangelist and an anointed prophet and an apostle with a calling to establish other churches and a gifted teacher and a few pastors with shepherd hearts. Let them preach!

Do not build. "Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it." Do not make plans. Do not get dreamy. Your goal is not to gain numbers but to gain Him. That's it. Believe Jesus when He tells you that branches abiding in Him will bear fruit. How that occurs - He may use you as a team or use you individually - that is His concern, not yours.

Have a rotating coordinator. A coordinator is the voice of the group, responsible for carrying out the decisions of the group previously reached by consensus. The coordinator oversees the meetings in a manner that ensures the conveyance of the Holy Spirit.

It is wise to rotate the coordinator, the reason more obvious after reading the next article.

Have a start time but not a stop time. The meeting is over when the Holy Spirit is finished, not before. Amen? It may be over for one and not another. Because one or a few must leave is no reason to end the meeting.

Have food and fellowship time. Food fills the tummy and opens the heart. Meal time is bonding time. Buffet? Barbecue?

Looks like the "Few Etceteras" has become quite a list. Reminds me of a joke: Question: What does it mean when the preacher says, "I'm coming to the end"? Answer: Nothing.

I've saved the most important of the "Few Etceteras" for last:

Utilize a pulpit. Yes, such an idea sounds churchy, but a pulpit has advantages. A pulpit will stop cross-talking (more than one speaking, less than everyone listening). Everyone will be attentive to the one behind the pulpit, less apt to interject. The person speaking knows she has an opportunity to make a contribution without interruption, and will have the attentiveness of the group. And it's really good training to learn to speak formally to a gathering. This pulpit ministry could whet the appetite for more opportunities outside the group. Your house church will be a training college.

Of course the pulpit must be an open pulpit, open to whosoever. No person has more access than another. All must learn to go to the pulpit only by the leading of the Spirit.

And there is a much more critical reason to use a pulpit. It could save your fellowship from a takeover. A takeover? Yes, takeover, the subject of the next article.

C h a l l e n g e : A house church gathering is more than a Bible study and more than a prayer meeting. Much more. It is a gathering of the redeemed unto their redeemer, the Lord Jesus. It is a place to attain more of Him, to decrease, to be healed, to be changed. Your church is an opportunity to bless and be blessed, to challenge and be challenged. The outcome of your life and that of your friends will, in part, be relative to your hunger for more of Christ, and your determination to keep the group focused on Him.

P r a y e r : *Teach our souls, Father, our need for the Holy Spirit. Teach us that no gathering will be successful without Him. And Father, kindly anoint this article.* (And hopefully the reader says, "Amen!")

Article # seven: **The Takeover**

A takeover is when one takes over. A takeover is a controller scoring big-time. He has nabbed the controls and now is content.

There is not going to be a takeover in evangelical churches; everything is so controlled. But a house church is a different matter. Takeovers are common.

He (she) is more vocal than the rest, his laugh a little louder. He has an opinion about everything and slings verses like a pro. Weeks pass. Months go by. Eventually conversations are directed at him. He becomes the hub of the group. His opinions are sought, his approval coveted, and eventually his permission required. He runs the show. Takeover complete.

Not to say controllers are bad people. I know a controller, an evangelical, who loves Jesus more than most. This brother couldn't stop controlling if his life depended on it. He is only at peace when he has everything under control. It's a sickness. A high percentage of christians with whom I am acquainted are strong controllers. Controllers are often pastors of evangelical churches because

they wouldn't stop climbing until they gained top position. Perhaps it's safe to say most of us have a control problem, big or small.

Beware of chronic controllers. Takeovers in house churches are frequent. Now this is of little concern unless you have a keen desire for your church to be under the lordship of the Holy Spirit. If you want great results you must be under Him. You cannot allow a controller to take over your house church!!

A pulpit can help prevent a takeover.

Make this a rule: No person speaks except from the pulpit. No exceptions. I believe if you enforce this simple rule you will be protected. That puts controllers at a disadvantage. He can't just vocalize at whim. He must wait his turn and get the okay from the coordinator. Time at the pulpit can be regulated. No one has more access to the pulpit than another so words will come from several, not one or a few.

Words. Words are powerful. satan's words usurped authority from man. Words brought you into the family. Words can heal and words can destroy. Words unite and divide. Words heard by the group will determine their outcome. Pure words of the speaker benefit the listener. Words can draw you to, or pull you from, intimacy with Jesus Christ.

Please understand, it usually takes lots of words to take over a house church. It's hard to ask a controller to stop talking so much but easy to regulate his access to the pulpit. Those with shady motives will soon move on.

Have a dedication ceremony. Dedicate the pulpit to the Holy Spirit. Doesn't have to be much, a couple of boxes stacked on top of each other. Maybe a music stand. An X on the floor. Whatever. From here only do words go forth.

Now everyone knows where to direct their faith and prayers - at the pulpit. Anoint it with oil. Often. Pray over it. Often. Recommit it to the governorship of the Holy Spirit. Often.

To all there is clarity: Protecting the pulpit is protecting the lordship of the Holy Spirit. Protecting the pulpit is protecting your house church. Protecting the pulpit prevents a takeover by the religiously ambitious. He who controls the pulpit sways the group, captures the hearts. You want the Holy Spirit to sway, to impact, to capture loyalty. Only the Holy Spirit can cause branches to abide in the true vine. Only He can make Jesus lord in fact. Most house churches have meager success because most house churches, like their evangelical counterpart, are under the control of man.

Do not allow your house church to come under the control of anyone other than the Lord Jesus Christ - who will, if given preeminence, direct and govern through the Holy Spirit.

Before closing this article and this series, a few stories you may find interesting:

Azuza Street. I will relate, by memory, an account I have read in Frank Bartleman's Azuza Street

which I have read at least five times. There were powerful Holy Spirit directed meetings in the earliest years of the last century at an old warehouse on Azuza Street in Los Angeles, California. Those in charge refused to go to the pulpit except by the leading of the Lord. This left an empty pulpit. One of the preachers in attendance thought, "An empty pulpit? Just what I need to display my spiritual adeptness," and to the pulpit he goes. But he couldn't speak. The Spirit wouldn't let him. Another 'gifted' preacher gives it a try. Fell to the floor. Couldn't move. Broken. And another and another. Same thing. Their takeover failed.

Catholic Charismatic Prayer Meetings. !970's. What started out pure ended in disarray. Soon the group made themselves subservient to teachers they never met, book writers and conference speakers. "Stay within catholicism." "Obey the church." "Be an example to other catholics." "Blossom where you were planted." Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. After about a year the takeover was complete.

One more thing: God bless you!!

C ha l l e n g e : *Do not be limited by the expectations of others. Give yourself over to the lordship of Jesus Christ. Trust Him alone to bring about His preferences for your life. Enter into deeper realms of commitment and loyalty. There is more for those gutsy enough to go for it.*

P r a y e r : *Father, in Jesus' name protect each of us from takeovers. May we never capitulate to distractions, to self-love, to religious leaders. And precious Father, anoint this article. Use it for Your glory.* (And hopefully the reader says, "Amen!")