

Interaction with Wolfgang Simson's *Houses that Change the World: The Return of the House Churches* (Authentic, 2001).

In *Houses that Change the World: The Return of the House Churches*, Wolfgang Simson lays out an argument for the use of houses churches as the primary expression of the local church, distinct from a tradition congregation or even a cell church. To do so, he traces the historical place of the house church, suggest a number of its strengths, and offers some practical suggestions concerning how people might “do” house church. In addition, his analysis frequently shows the weaknesses of other, especially tradition, models of structuring the church. As one examines his argument, several key points are made. Moreover, much can be learned not only by what he explicitly puts forth; the reader should also discover a few key ideas regarding the nature of ecclesiastical debates. It is unfortunate that some of the biggest points to be taken from the book are negative, i.e. what’s wrong with it.

Firstly, readers should be warned against theologizing and strategizing in such a way that claims too much, overuses emotive language, exploits false dichotomies, and shabbily cites the sources that supposedly defend key ideas. Again and again, Simson’s statements are too bold, such as when he claims that unless we return to house churches, we will continue to “fall short of being obedient to the Great Commission” (xxviii). Similarly, he says that the average megachurch structure “prevents 1680 people . . . from being won every five years” (249). At other times, he is unnecessarily provocative, such as when he needlessly contrasts “seminary-trained professional” with “family-and-life-trained fathers,” asserting that the church needs the latter, not the former. This anti-theological education tone is ramped throughout the book (xxxiv). In various places, he appeals to history without citing any authority (41, 50, 58). From this, we should learn to carefully choose our words in order to make clear arguments.

Second, as we debate the nature and work of the church, we should take care to offer positive Scripture support, not merely attack the weaknesses of other views. The bulk of Simson's case depends on his exploiting the struggles that any congregation might have. This happens a lot in chapter 1. He argues that traditional structures (or maybe, whatever is not a house church) are "less" biblical. There is some doublespeak here in that he claims not to want to copy the New Testament church, instead having structures "for our own time" (30). However, elsewhere, he overtly equates "house church" with God's ongoing will (36, 97). If the truth be told, very few specific details are given how all people should structure the church; yet, he abuses Scripture and history at times to force his points, often resorting to straw man arguments (xx, 55, 119, 137, 142, 172, 200). In provocatively caricaturing traditional congregations as "brands," he forgets that "house churches" have their own agenda and brand like anything else (140, 150-151). In fact, Simson's case relies more on his confidence in structures (cp. 28), more on his distaste for traditional methods, and little on Scripture itself. His words resound with a lot anti-authoritarian sentiment (94, 35, 145). Therefore, another point that we should note is that ecclesiastical discussions should admit the degree in which Scripture overtly supports a point, in contradistinction from person preference, historical speculation, and inevitable problems within churches full of sinners.

Third, the reader should be on guard against the "idealizing." When Simson writes, he demurs anything that smacks of Jewish or Roman influence (26, 58-60), yet God used many "pagan" ideas in Scripture, like circumcision (which was not unique to Israel). God simply gave it new meaning. It is easy for church planters to idealize a certain context or time, seeking them to recreate it. This dynamic is often present when someone is rarely satisfied and tends to be critical of whatever is popular or common. Thus, he unhelpfully dichotomizes

“contextualization” and “indigenization” (129, 209), calling the former an importing of foreign ideas into a local culture. Yet, this is precisely what the incarnation is—Christ, who is not of this world, coming into the world, to import himself and his kingdom into our reality. Ironic, also, is his later calls for local patterns and models of ministry (275); yet, are not these “pagan”? Could not the early Christian fathers have employed what were at the time “local” ways of organizing the church?

Fourth, and positively, Simon argues that we should obey 2 Tim 2:2 by developing structure that train leaders and raise up others who will know how to teach and care for the church (105, 109). This should be tempered by the reminder that structures don’t develop biblical leaders; rather, this is done when godly persons spend time with, speak truth to, and are an example for new believers. How we “do” church should intentionally and naturally raise up leaders.

Fifth, churches should have a broader vision that existence, and even multiplication. That is, the reader should discern the importance of quality, not just quantity (291). Too often, his analogy about the boy, the arrow, and the drawn target accurately describe the way people assess their own churches (285). Vision is essential for maturity.

Sixth, there is a ring truth to the idea that “it is difficult, if not impossible, to preach the message of redemption from a position of power” (158). Moreover, the point should be observed that the most popular guides on church planting and growth “come from the non-persecuted churches rather than the persecuted churches” (157). As we consider viable models for the local church, humility would lead us to hear the wisdom of those in other contexts. In addition, readers should reflect on the importance of a church’s location in relationship to proclaiming the gospel.

What is communicated or lost when so many churches are planted in the suburbs when so little is happening in poor and diverse city centers?

Seventh, he makes a point that would be rejected by many today. He suggests that the local church is not primarily intended for non-Christians (45). This idea should not be quickly ignored. Many churches become so seeker-friendly that they become believer useless. Great emphasis is given in the Bible on Christians loving one another; however, it seems most talk inside the church centers on the outsiders. This may explain some of the reasons why our churches are often more attractive on the outside than on the inside.

The difficulty in evaluating *House That Change the World* is that Simson's book largely depends on negatively criticizing other models and his questionable use of the Bible. Very few positive arguments, unique to the house church model, are put forth. It would seem therefore that his book might prove a different point than the authored intended. While the Scripture offers a portrait of the early church and does give a few specific details as to its functioning, very little is commanded as to structure. As has been suggested, the book reflects a tendency in ecclesiastical discussions to over speak, to forge provocative dichotomies, and stretch the Scripture's meaning beyond what the original author ever suggested. The book is dangerous in its apparent disparaging of theological training; it posits a class system inside the church where it does not always exist. This text would be improved if it were more humble in its reading of the Bible. It is not generous towards contrary models. As a result, the writer baptizes the first century context, or at least, the form necessarily taken when under persecution. The author fails to note that when persecution leaves, so many churches like to create a "sacred space" distinct from their daily places of work and rest.

Positively, his presentation reminds the reader that the church must recognize and renew a number of principles and priorities. First, growth—in quality and quantity—must trump mere existence. Practically, this means constant reevaluation, vision casting, and flexibility to adapt to circumstances. This will impact structures, finances, and approaches to leadership. Second, structures matter. In one instance, structures can become sacred, such that people defend the systems themselves. On the other hand, structures have value inasmuch as they lead to the desired goal. Structures can hasten development, though not guaranteeing it.

Many questions could be discussed, including:

1. How can leaders be developed *with quality* (including theologically) that would meet the rapid demands of multiplication?
2. Is there any clear biblical warrant, one way or another, for or against the use of dialogue versus the use of the modern sermon in congregational worship?
3. How can pastor-elders shepherd those whom they rarely see? While it may well be the task of the flock to tend itself at times, nevertheless, the pastor has general responsibilities.
4. What are some of the most common problems—strategically and ethically—one finds in a house church? (For example, one weakness charged against mega-churches is the lack of intimacy. However, see Stark, *What Americans Really Believe*, 48-49).
5. It is inevitable that kids distract and disrupt from teaching/discussion times? How can this be helped in all women are to be present yet not have any childcare? Is it entirely wrong to expect husbands to teach their wives if the wife needs to miss it?
6. In order to pool money for larger tasks, like foreign missions, it is necessary that house churches form/join a denomination? Or, function in some way like a multi-site church?
7. Could it be possible that a church morphs its structure in different seasons, depending on maturity, location, etc? Could the house-church structure exist within a multi-site church?