

# *Encountering the House Church Movement: 'A Different Kind of Christianity'*<sup>1</sup>

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All of us will have encountered the House Church Movement (HCM) in one of its many guises. It could be those younger members of the congregation who attend Dales Weeks; students uncritically singing the chorus 'I hear the sound of rustling in the leaves of the trees',<sup>2</sup> the occasional reference in our reading to the HCM; or those from a nearby 'fellowship' who have poached members of the congregation. The ethos of the movement is disseminated through choruses, magazines, records, cassette tapes and videos. In a situation where there is a steady decline in membership and attendance in the established denominations, and growth in the independent churches (including the house churches) some assessment of the situation needs to be made.<sup>3</sup> We cannot ignore the house churches – but how do we respond to them? There is ignorance on both sides. There is often a failure to communicate, and an unwillingness to face the challenge which the HCM represents. Our denominational security is threatened by what at first sight may appear to be no more than lively, youthful, revivalist fervour. 'People everywhere chatting, hugging, kissing, laughing, so pleased to see each other. This is church? You have to pinch yourself. No whispered greetings and quiet hush as the organ plays dirge-like tunes; instead the orchestra tunes up . . .'<sup>4</sup> The worship service may last between two or three hours and all members of the congregation are encouraged to take a full part.

Some may respond to the house churches by dialogue;<sup>5</sup> others may become understandably angry and frustrated when members of their own congregation join a house church; many are unaware of the important issues which are at stake over the doctrine of the church, ministry and sacraments; a minority will themselves leave their denomination and join them: 'Vicar leaves Church of England – and the congregation goes with him'.<sup>6</sup> Those who leave have a clear explanation of their move. 'Enlightened by the Spirit and the word, they no longer felt in harmony with their church's life. These changed people became square pegs in a Baptist, Anglican or other denomina-

tional round hole. Their divergent aspirations made it impossible to stay'.<sup>7</sup>

When we read that our own position in the Anglican church is untenable, what can we say in our defence while we remain committed to our situation within a mixed membership, established church? Should we abandon the old wineskins in place of the new? The judgment of the *Restoration* group is clear. David Matthew concludes – 'There's no hope . . . within the current institutional and denominational structures . . . because they are not, in themselves the church';<sup>8</sup> further, 'denominations are alien to God's desire and ultimately unredeemable . . . new wineskins, consciously flexible and adaptable, must take their place as the one worldwide church comes into being';<sup>9</sup> and, finally, with the caveat, 'God has used denominations', he asserts, 'he doesn't intend to perpetuate them'.<sup>10</sup> In Gerald Coates's opinion 'the Holy Spirit is on a collision course with all forms of inflexible Christianity . . . Denominationalism is sin! It is heresy! There is no way round it'.<sup>11</sup> Denominations are, according to Arthur Wallis, 'contrary to God's declared purpose for his church in this age'.<sup>12</sup> Therefore the choice is clear. Christians must either 'move on with God, cross the Jordan and enter their rest and their inheritance; or they will settle for what they are currently enjoying, and cling to the "safety" of that which is institutional and traditional, be it ancient or modern'.<sup>13</sup>

### The Pathway to a Denominational Identity

The progress from sect to denomination is clearly evident in the history of the Christian church. The frequently quoted examples are those concerning the formation of the Plymouth Brethren in the 1830s and the Salvation Army in the 1870s. The transition from sect to denomination occurs quite rapidly within the space of a generation.<sup>14</sup> There is a need today to distinguish between a *sect* and a *cult*. The two are not the same, but frequently the terms are confused and used interchangeably. A sect is a breakaway group from a denomination, which retains an orthodox or semi-orthodox theology, and may or may not have a developed ecclesiology; it will frequently elevate secondary matters of doctrine to become matters of primary importance (eg insistence on believer's baptism, and a particular theory concerning the second coming of Christ). A cult which has quasi-'Christian' associations (eg Mormons and Unification Church), deviates in two fundamental principles. First, it has a false or inadequate basis of salvation (playing down the finished work of Christ, and making man's acceptance before God conditional on a system of works); second, a false basis of authority (ie the bible 'plus' or 'minus'; the cult leader's interpretation of Scripture; or new 'revelation' which

will be normative for the cult members).<sup>15</sup> It is worth quoting a sociologist's definition of a sect:

It is a voluntary association; membership is by proof to sect authorities of some claim to personal merit – such as knowledge of doctrine, affirmation of a conversion experience, or recommendation of members in good standing; exclusiveness is emphasised, and expulsion exercised against those who contravene doctrinal, moral or organisational precepts; its self-conception is of an elect, a gathered remnant, possessing special enlightenment; personal perfection is the expected standard of aspiration, in whatever terms this is judged; it accepts, at least as an ideal, the priesthood of all believers; there is a high level of lay participation; there is opportunity for the member spontaneously to express his commitment; the sect is hostile or indifferent to the secular society and to the state.<sup>16</sup>

Some sects develop into denominations and then after a period they wane (eg the Catholic Apostolic Church) while others remain, in spite of internal division (eg the Christian Brethren). The HCM is a sect which is in the process of becoming a denomination. But will it grow and develop and gradually absorb all true believers who have left the denominational churches; or will it settle down to become an exclusive Pentecostalist, Fundamentalist, apocalyptic community of believers?

### **Variations on a Theme**

In the 1960s and seventies the Charismatic movement took place within the existing denominations; in the seventies and eighties, a movement running parallel to the Charismatic movement, yet distinct from it, developed as the HCM.<sup>17</sup> Charismatic renewal is seen by those in the HCM as a partial restoration, since it remains confined within the denominational, professing churches. But for the house church convert, 'renewal was not enough'.<sup>18</sup> Restoration is the free activity of the Spirit outside the denominational restraints. God's concern is seen to be beyond the denominations and is to be found in a restored New Testament community.

It is impossible to speak in generalized terms about 'the house church movement'. There is a great variety in terms of style and emphasis. Some of the house churches are totally independent, others are part of a national (sometimes international) network. However, certain characteristics are common to a number of house churches. Most are independent and separatist in outlook, and perfectionist in emphasis. Believer's baptism is the norm. Few members are aged over forty, and congregations are eclectic. The movement is strongly anti-denominational, anti-liturgical and anti-clerical. Within some sections of the HCM authoritarian leadership and 'shepherding' has

developed into an alternative papalism. Restored 'apostles' and 'prophets' have given the teaching a divine *imprimatur*. The movement is a world-denying gathered kingdom of believers, who eagerly await the return of Christ, which has not only a Fundamentalist theology, but is in reality 'an alternative society',<sup>19</sup> 'a different kind of Christianity'.<sup>20</sup> Great stress is placed on the word 'community' – which includes the whole family, parents and children, brothers and sisters in Christ – all in close relationship to each other.

The term 'House Church' is misleading. It certainly could refer to a 'happy clappy' gathering in someone's house (and may well have started like that), but it is more likely to be a gathering of 300 to 500 people meeting in a local hall, school, theatre or disused church building. The term '(Newtown) Community Church' or '(Newtown) Christian Fellowship' is a usual designation.

Since no statistics are published, it is impossible to give precise membership figures – but a reasonable estimate is between 60,000 and 100,000.<sup>21</sup> The *UK Christian Handbook* gives an estimated membership of 60,000 in 2,000 communities.<sup>22</sup> This means that in relative numerical strength it has about the same membership as the Christian Brethren; it is considerably larger than the episcopal church in Scotland, and is about the same strength as the Baptists in Wales.<sup>23</sup> As well as the committed membership there are those from denominational churches who are casual supporters, and who appreciate the ethos of the house churches. The HCM is predominantly city-centred and suburban, and the regular jamboree attracts large numbers. At 'The Banquet – a feast of rock, praise and teaching' held in Wembley in the summer of 1982 were over 11,000.<sup>24</sup> At the Dales Week, Harrogate, in 1980, there were an estimated 10,000 in attendance. 'God', we are told, 'loves Bible weeks'.<sup>25</sup> At least 1,000 of those attending such gatherings would be from a non-house church background. As many as ninety per cent of the membership of the house churches is direct transfer growth from other denominations. 'Sadly, this usually results in the neglect of evangelistic responsibilities as new members are mistaken for new converts'.<sup>26</sup> Though there is evidence of some evangelistic outreach in areas 'which have hitherto been resistant to the Church's mission',<sup>27</sup> it is untrue to suggest that 'at present, the greatest vitality and growth among God's people is outside institutional Christianity'.<sup>28</sup> While the HCM is a strongly lay movement, some of the leadership comprises disaffected ordained ministers.

The majority of house churches are related to one of the four principal groupings, the largest being the Restoration faction based at Bradford which in 1979 had an estimated membership of between 35,000 to 40,000.<sup>29</sup> The Restoration churches at Bradford, Bath, Leeds, Leicester and Norwich, each have a membership of about 500. Outside the main network of travelling apostles, and the 'covering' of

one house church by another, are numerous independent fellowships, which are, in all but name, 'Charismatic Exclusive Brethren'. In addition there are a number of denominational churches which have adopted house church teaching which stress 'restoration' principles, 'kingdom' teaching<sup>30</sup> and authoritarian leadership. A noted example is the Bugbrooke Baptist church, which became the Jesus Fellowship Church (Baptist), now known as the New Creation Christian Community.<sup>31</sup>

The HCM spreads through the establishment of satellite groups often at some considerable distance from the parent body, at home or overseas. Emmanuel Church, Durham, describes itself as 'an inter-denominational, charismatic church which is pastorally related to the Coign Fellowship, Woking, Surrey, one of Britain's largest and fastest growing churches' and is 'also related to the national leadership of Youth with a Mission, based at Crawley, Sussex'.<sup>32</sup> The Basingstoke Community Church has eight local satellites, and one in Milton Keynes; the Southampton Community Church has seven satellites.<sup>33</sup> Internal division is not uncommon, and schisms take place within the movement over the quest for doctrinal purity. The Worcester House Church split twice within a four year period.<sup>34</sup>

## The Four Principal Groupings

### 1 *South Chard, Somerset*

The Full Gospel Fellowship, founded by Sidney Purse, was opened at Tatworth in 1956, now called the South Chard Fellowship. Particular emphases are body ministry, healing and deliverance, re-baptism 'in the name of Jesus only'. It sponsors the 'Fellowship Tours' travel business.

### 2 *North grouping*

'Pastor' George Wally North exercises an apostolic ministry, and is highly respected by members in the 'North Circuit'. It tends to be isolationist, though each of the satellites is uniform in outlook. It has a strongly held belief in sinless perfectionism and is Pentecostalist in emphasis. Women wear a distinctive three-cornered headscarf during the meetings.

### 3 *Coates grouping*

It is led by Gerald Coates of the Cobham Fellowship, Surrey. He started meetings in his home with five people in 1970, and now has a membership of over 400 people.<sup>35</sup> It is concerned with evangelism and outreach into the community, and plant cell fellowships elsewhere. There is a stress on prophetic ministry and large gatherings – eg Kingdom Life gatherings at the Civic Hall, Guildford (1,000 attend);

'The Banquet' – 'a platform of praise for the prophetic word'; 'Festival 84' – 'Kingdom life in a secular society' at Staffordshire County Showground (about 3,500 attended Festival 83). Training courses are held for leaders, musicians, administrators, housegroup leaders and those involved in drama. The outlook is expressed through 'Pioneer Enterprises' (Pioneer Bulletin, Pioneer Publications and Pioneer Recordings), and in Coates's book *What on Earth is This Kingdom?* The Coates grouping is the most open of the four main house church groups.

#### 4 Restoration

Based at 'The Church House', Bradford since 1978, it has three main elders – David Matthew, Peter Parris and Keri Jones, over whom Bryn Jones exercises an apostolic role. The outlook of the group is expressed in Arthur Wallis's book *The Radical Christian*, and in the bi-monthly magazine *Restoration*. The policy statement of the magazine is clear:

Restoration magazine exists as a prophetic voice to the people of God, calling us back to NT principles and on to God's full purpose for his church. This involves casting aside what is merely institutional and traditional, and restoring much that has been lost or neglected over the centuries.

It asserts that God is not complacent over a professing church that is divided and segmented. He is moving by his Spirit to break down all denominational and sectarian barriers . . . Restoration magazine believes in the triumph of the church in this age, as God's instrument to bring in his kingdom. Already the Bride is awakening from her slumber. . . .

The Restoration group has a strong anti-clerical bias, but it has its own clearly defined leadership pyramid structure. The leaders exercise an apostolic prophetic ministry, and below them are elders (pastors and house group leaders) and below them the members. The leaders function as shepherds and members submit to their authority. The leadership pattern is such that 'no individual decision may be taken without prior consultation with the elders – to rebel against them is to rebel against God'.<sup>36</sup>

The Church House Commitment Class on the 'Foundations of Christian experience' states that 'if there is ever going to be a strong united church in Bradford, the foundations need to be firmly established. Hence these commitment classes for would-be members'.<sup>37</sup> The submission of members to church leaders is made perfectly clear. 'It is a condition of membership of this church that you be willing for the leadership to have entry to every part of your life that may need adjustment'.<sup>38</sup>

Restoration teaching is propagated through Harvestime publications, cassette tapes and videos. The annual turnover of Harvestime, employing a full time staff of nineteen, is over half a million pounds.

There is an opportunity for further teaching through a home study course, the 'School of the Word', and study at Riddlesden College at Riddlesden near Keighley, West Yorkshire, described as an 'international Christian leadership programme'. Annual teaching events include bible weekends (held in 1984 at Chelmsford, Shaftesbury, Knutsford and Chadacre), and bible weeks – Dales Bible Week at Harrogate; Wales Bible Week, Builth Wells; and Downs Bible Week, Brighton.

### **The Re-writing of Church History**

Although we may be biased in our reading of history, particularly of church history, we must endeavour to be fair in our reading of the events of the distant past and of the immediate present. We may rightly criticize less than objective views of the past, eg the partisan history written by Tractarians,<sup>39</sup> or 'The Banner of Truth' view which restricts the hand of God to a very select group of Calvinists – George Whitefield, Robert Murray M'Cheyne, Charles Haddon Spurgeon and John Charles Ryle. Similarly the *Restoration* view of the history of the church over the past 2,000 years is described as the 'Church Adrift' and with characteristic over-simplification, church history is divided into three ages:<sup>40</sup>

- 1 *Decline* since Pentecost; 'the dark ages of church life' until the sixteenth century.
- 2 *Recovery* seen in terms of revival, reformation and restoration.
- 3 *Development and fulness*: the development of the HCM away from the denominational 'professing' church. 'Restoration speaks of recovery',<sup>41</sup> and with a particular focus on Acts 3:21 'He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets'.

There is a concern to return to the supposed simplicity and purity of the early church, which was unfettered with church buildings, denominations, traditions, clergy etc. All that is needed is to get 'back to the fountain' – to return to the pure spirit of the New Testament, and to learn from church history (insofar as it illuminates the Restoration view of history). 'Restoration means living in that enabling, doing the things they did at the beginning and being the kind of people that formed the Church'.<sup>42</sup> Wallis actually pushes aside all church history:

If we wish to make a reappraisal of Spirit baptism, if we want to discover God's thoughts and feelings once again, it is no good referring back to church history, ecclesiastical tradition or evangelical opinion. We must trace the stream back to its source. We must look at God's original promise and how it was fulfilled.<sup>43</sup>

All traditions have gone sadly wrong. But always in the history of the church the breakaways have restored God's plan for his church. The HCM is clearly 'breaking the pattern of history', 'Sooner or later the pattern of history must be broken . . . Why shouldn't that generation be your generation and mine?'<sup>44</sup> If David Matthew had lived in a previous generation, he confessed that he would have been 'an enthusiastic Montanist, Clunyite, Reformed, Anabaptist, Wesleyan or Pentecostal'.<sup>45</sup> What is favoured today is the designation 'Christian NOD': 'Not otherwise designated'.<sup>46</sup>

Fundamental to understanding the present situation is a realization that Christ is soon to return, and in these last days true Christian unity will be achieved by: a) a massive influx of new believers into the house churches who will 'constitute the core of the end-time church'; b) the ministry of apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastor-teachers; c) prayer for those who are 'trapped in denominationalism'; d) genuine believers leaving the dichard denominations, and those professing churches becoming increasingly apostate; e) persecution which will unite all true believers.<sup>47</sup> 'The goal for all is a Church reformed and brought to its predestined glory so that Jesus can return'.<sup>48</sup>

Such re-writing of church history is highly selective and a naïve interpretation of the past. House church 'history' represents the failure to see the evidence of the Holy Spirit at work throughout the history of the church – particularly in those areas which may not be fully understood or appreciated.

### **The Nature of the Schism**

Since the issue concerning the HCM is primarily over ecclesiology, many of its features are not new in the history of the Christian church. It is worth examining earlier attempts to deal with similar issues. The first concerns a public rebuke for those who openly break the unity of the church. Article Thirty-four 'Of the traditions of the church', makes it clear that 'traditions and ceremonies' in the church are not uniform, but are to be consistent with the word of God. Furthermore, private judgment may not be exercised in such a fashion that it 'offendeth against the common order of the church, and hurteth the authority of the magistrate, and woundeth the consciences of the weak brethren'. Those who offend and 'willingly and purposely doth openly break the traditions and ceremonies of the church, which be not repugnant to the word of God, and be ordained and approved by common authority, ought to be rebuked openly. . . .'

The second concerns the unity of the church and the condemnation of those guilty of schism and heresy. Fundamental to John Calvin's doctrine of the church was its unity. Book Four of the *Institutes* is on the church: 'The External Means or Aims by which God Invites Us



into the Society of Christ and Holds us therein'. The church is one. 'For what God has joined together, it is not lawful to put asunder'.

By baptism we are initiated into faith in Christ; by partaking in the Lord's Supper we attest our unity in true doctrine and love; in the Word of the Lord we have agreement, and for the preaching of the Word the ministry instituted by Christ is preserved. In this church are mingled many hypocrites who have nothing of Christ but the name and outward appearance . . . Such are tolerated for a time either because they cannot be convicted by a competent tribunal or because a vigorous discipline does not always flourish as it ought.<sup>49</sup>

Calvin, like other reformers, condemned Anabaptism which, whilst being a general title to include a variety of dissident groups, was in favour of the separation of church and state, a gathered church which exercised strict discipline, and opposition to infant baptism. Some groups were also millennialist in outlook, whose fiction, maintained Calvin, 'is too childish either to need or to be worth a refutation'.<sup>50</sup>

Repeatedly Calvin condemned those guilty of schism whether over secondary matters;<sup>51</sup> imperfection;<sup>52</sup> disorder;<sup>53</sup> ill-discipline: 'even if the church be slack in its duty, still each and every individual has not the right at once to take upon himself the decision to separate';<sup>54</sup> and false claims to perfectionism.<sup>55</sup> Rather than break the unity of the church Calvin urged that Christians should

not fail to pray ardently for the restoration of the church, which, in our day, is involved in sad desolation . . . we are also informed that Christ's kingdom is not upheld and advanced by the polity of men, but that this is the work of God alone, for in his blessing solely the faithful are taught to confide.<sup>56</sup>

Calvin defended himself (and those of the other Reformers) who were accused of being guilty of schism and heresy:

Those who, by making dissension, break the communion of the church are called heretics and schismatics. Now this communion is held together by two bonds, agreement in sound doctrine and brotherly love. Hence between heretics and schismatics Augustine makes this sort of distinction; heretics corrupt the sincerity of the faith with false dogmas; but schismatics, while sometimes even of the same faith, break the bond of fellowship.

But it must also be noted that this conjunction of love so depends upon unity of faith that it ought to be its beginning, end, and, in fine, its sole rule. Let us therefore remember that whenever church unity is commended to us, this is required: that while our minds agree in Christ, our wills also should be joined with mutual benevolence in Christ.<sup>57</sup>

Thirdly, separation for its own sake is sinful. A well-documented discussion over schism is recorded in Samuel Walker's correspondence with John and Charles Wesley in the mid 1750s.<sup>58</sup> The two issues at that time were over the use of lay-preachers: 'lay preaching is a

separation in part',<sup>59</sup> and over the formation of classes for Methodists. Later controversies were a much more serious disruption of the church's unity – irregular ordinations and the lay celebration of Holy Communion.

John Wesley was frustrated by the orders and laws of the Church of England. To this Walker asked, 'Have you anything better to put in their place, which will not ultimately suffer from the same weakness you are now seeking to overcome?'<sup>60</sup> Walker argued: 'If it be not sinful to abide in a particular church, it must be sinful to separate from it . . . To separate for the sake of separating is strange work! To separate because it is sinful to abide is something; but to be fishing for reasons to justify a separation, when one means nothing by that separation but to please oneself, or raise a party, this is strange work!'<sup>61</sup>

Deliberate separation or schism from the catholic church is a serious matter. To separate over foundational matters is understandable; but deliberately to separate over secondary matters of church order, the mode of baptism, teaching about the work of the Holy Spirit, the relationship between church and state, is overstating the preferences of individuals over the unity of the wider church. Disagreement over secondary matters is hardly a justifiable reason for regarding professing churches as being apostate. Merely to claim that 'the Lord' is telling members of the HCM to separate is difficult to refute; particularly since the Lord seems to be telling other Christians to remain as active members of denominational churches so that they can be reformed and renewed from within.<sup>62</sup>

## **Matters of Concern within the HCM**

There are a range of matters which are of serious concern with the HCM. Unfortunately many of those who are caught up by the warm, relaxed, loving house church community do not appreciate the underlying theological issues.

### *1 Authoritarian Leadership*

God is believed to be ruling his church through his appointed apostles. 'The apostle has a special relationship with churches that he has founded; there his authority and fatherhood are undisputed'.<sup>63</sup> Below the apostles are ruling elders who direct the life of the local house church. 'Submission' and 'covering' are the order of the day. Members 'make themselves accountable to one another which acts as a reinforcement to their own discipline'.<sup>64</sup> It is a matter of serious concern that such activities are more closely associated with the cults than with orthodox Christianity.<sup>65</sup> Admittedly, much of this 'shepherding/discipleship' movement is currently found in the USA,<sup>66</sup> but there are signs that it is being found more in Britain.<sup>67</sup> The

'covering' of the congregation by another shows both the nationwide and international aspects of the HCM.

## 2 *Confused Teaching*

There is a characteristic naïve and selective use of Scripture. 'The bible is the blueprint for practice and doctrine in the church, not history or tradition'.<sup>68</sup> It is surely arrogant to claim that we can learn nothing from the past, and from only a particular interpretation of Scripture. The New Testament church was a diverse body. Tradition is valuable, not being equal to Scripture, but to illuminate the interpretation of Scripture.

Aspects of the HCM are strongly antinomian in outlook, and such views are expressed in the titles of publications such as *Not under Law, Free from sin*.<sup>69</sup>

The South Chard grouping literally follow the texts in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 2:38, 10:48) to baptize in the name of Jesus only. This includes not only those baptized as infants but re-baptism of adults previously baptized in the name of Trinity. But F. F. Bruce maintains 'we need not think of a precise formula here'.<sup>70</sup> This teaching has always been strongly condemned by the majority within the Pentecostal tradition, and only held by a minority. At the fourth general council meeting of the Assemblies of God in October 1916 those who held the belief in the 'one name doctrine' resigned from membership of the Assemblies of God and a resolution was passed which recognized both Matthew 28:19 and Acts 2:38 as being inspired by God, and recommended 'that all our preachers include in their formula used in connection with the act of baptism the words used by Jesus in Matthew 28:19'.<sup>71</sup> It is strange that those Fundamentalists reject Matthew 28:19 in much the same way that liberal scholars have rejected it as being a late, Trinitarian addition to the text.

Millennialist teaching has always obscured biblical teaching and been an attractive source for speculation among the sects. Our response is perfectly clear. When the plain teaching of Scripture is exchanged 'for the simple, the spiritual, the eternal, the satisfying felicity of the catholic hope . . . It is our duty to reject them altogether'.<sup>72</sup> An earlier generation of Evangelicals were clear in their condemnation of those who advocated millennialism:

The Irvingite heresy, and the sect usually called the Plymouth Brethren, certainly took their rise from the indulgence of speculative views on the second advent and the millennium. Such views will not indeed make the millennium system true, nor the doctrine of the second coming false: but they may teach us to depart with caution from the catholic truth on such points, and lead us to hold with modesty and forbearance any opinions in which we appear peculiar or isolated.<sup>73</sup>

### 3 *Isolation and Further Division*

The majority of those in the HCM isolate themselves from other Christians in the so-called professing or denominational churches; they have reason to do so since the majority of the membership have come from them! Isolation of a different type is evident in the formation of house church schools at Hemel Hempstead,<sup>74</sup> Southampton and Basingstoke. Church history makes it clear that the quest for individual perfectionism and the perfect church leads to further division and not greater unity.

### 4 *Believer's Baptism*

Believer's baptism is the norm within the HCM. 'When the Spirit is leading on into restoration, baptism has become an issue'.<sup>75</sup> Thus a matter which is of secondary significance is raised to that of primary doctrinal importance. Of course it must be admitted that indiscriminate infant baptism together with confirmation at too young an age has denied the opportunity for a public confession of faith, other than in the renewal of baptismal vows. But re-baptism should be seen much more in terms of leaving one denomination and joining another. David Pawson, one of the apostles associated with the Basingstoke Community Church, stresses the internal conviction of the believer to determine the validity of his baptism. He reduces baptism to an individualistic confession of faith:

Denominational polity makes it difficult to change conviction without changing affiliation . . . In some, 're-baptism' is considered a serious enough error to merit excommunication . . . But in the last analysis it's not what I think or what you think or what your minister thinks that matters. You need to talk it over with the Lord himself. 'Do whatever he tells you' (John 2:5) and even plain water reveals the glory of the Lord.<sup>76</sup>

## **An Evangelical Anglican Response to the Challenge of the HCM**

If the existence of the HCM does nothing else, it should challenge us to examine our own position. Since the issue is primarily a matter of ecclesiology, we should think through our doctrine of the church. We have created many of the problems for ourselves. Evangelicalism has encouraged a strong, simple, individualistic piety, but without a firm commitment to the church. We have supported the development of strong para-church agencies but often without nurturing individuals within the life of the church. Support for the various Christian roadshows, far from acting as a unit of celebration in worshipping with other Christians, tends to create a deep dissatisfaction with the local church, which is, by comparison, a pale reflection of the larger gathering.

Much of our failure is our ignorance of church history. Schismatic groups have appeared throughout the history of the church. We should take notice of how others dealt with them, and also re-evaluate our own position without totally condemning the new movements. Evangelicals like Charles Simeon taught individuals to remain loyal to the Church of England. Had it not been for Simeon, many Evangelicals would have left and become Methodists. 'It was Simeon', said Charles Smyth, 'who, more than any other single individual, taught the younger Evangelicals to love the Church of England and enabled them to feel that they belonged within her body'.<sup>77</sup> While Abner Brown spoke of 'Simeon's sound churchmanship', Simeon was criticized by others for being 'more of a churchman than a gospelman'.<sup>78</sup> Why? Because of his loyalty to the Church of England and to the Reformation settlement. Simeon and his school recognized that the formularies of the Church of England expressed a biblical framework, which was consistent with Scripture, an authentic expression of catholic and reformed Christianity. We need to recover our confidence in being Evangelical Anglicans.

In conclusion, our response to the HCM needs to be concerned with the following:

### 1 *A Concern for Doctrine*

Our doctrine and practice must be related. Without a clear baptismal policy, and with infant baptism offered 'out of love' to non-Christian parents in the hope that they might become Christians which seems to be a denial of the biblical basis for infant baptism, our theology is considerably weakened. In abusing a scriptural ordinance we play into the hands of those who deny the validity of infant baptism.

We need to develop a clearer doctrine of the church. Probably J.I. Packer is right when he maintains that no Evangelical has written on the doctrine of the church since Dean Richard Field in the seventeenth century. Archbishop Robert Runcie has spoken about the value of the Church of England being a 'broad church', but its very broadness often dishonours the gospel we proclaim and weakens our position in the eyes of those who may be attracted towards the HCM.

### 2 *A Concern for Community*

What are the marks of the true church? The Reformers were agreed about the preaching of the Word and the administration of the two sacraments, and some added the exercise of discipline. In addition, we can see that the church is also a warm, caring, worshipping community. There is a strong sense of 'family' within the house church tradition, caring for each other within cell groups. The members enjoying coming together for worship and celebration. But that is not always the same for us as we worship God week by week.

We need to arrest the losses from the denominational churches.

Commitment classes are the norm in the house churches. Our pattern of membership is much less developed. We need to be much more flexible in our outreach and establish new church fellowships in, for example, new housing areas without having to erect church buildings.

We need a developed pattern of pastoral care for those who have left the house churches. Often this care and support is similar to that given to those who have left the cults. The danger is that the casualties will not join denominational churches. They feel guilty because they have left the 'true' church and are ostracized by those still in them.

### 3 *A Concern for Preaching and Teaching*

We need to re-establish priorities in our worship, preaching and teaching.

Far too much worship in Britain is culturally irrelevant. Music and preaching are so out of touch with the ordinary man in the street that attending church has become one of the most irrelevant activities imaginable. The music is chosen to satisfy the needs of a musical elite and the average preacher has lost the common touch.<sup>79</sup>

Adult Christian education courses should be regarded as a priority and not an optional extra. Ignorant Christians are open to the attractiveness of the house churches.

We need to be more discriminating in our worship. Each time we sing 'I hear the sound of rustling in the leaves of the trees' we are expressing the ethos of the HCM: we in the professing churches are being eclipsed by the house churches.

I hear the sound of rustling in the leaves of the trees,  
The Spirit of the Lord has come down on the earth.  
The church that seemed in slumber has now risen from its knees  
And dry bones are responding with the fruits of new birth.  
Oh this is now a time for declaration,  
The word will go to all men everywhere;  
The church is here for healing of the nations,  
Behold the day of Jesus drawing near.

In another context N.T. Wright has encouraged us to 'explore together the full meaning of being Gospel people, Bible people and Church people, in the certain knowledge that this will make us better Evangelicals and better Anglicans, because better Christians'.<sup>80</sup> This is particularly necessary today as we encounter the HCM.

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