

THE HOUSE CHURCH MOVEMENT

1

GENERAL POST-WAR TRENDS

1. Worldwide Developments

Wider awareness of Pentecostal teaching

After World War II, the Pentecostal denominations began to emerge from much of the suspicion and ostracism that had earlier attended them. Mass interdenominational evangelistic campaigns in the 1950s and 1960s by evangelists of Pentecostal beliefs, especially from the USA, led to a wider awareness of Pentecostals and their doctrine. The non-denominational F.G.B.M.F.I. also played a major role in the spreading of Pentecostal ideas worldwide.

The neo-pentecostal movement

As a result, in the 1950s, there arose what is sometimes called the 'neo-pentecostal movement'. The baptism and gifts of the Spirit began to be sought and experienced among believers from non-pentecostal backgrounds. Unlike before, however, instead of either leaving or being ostracised from their existing churches, believers remained within them.

The charismatic movement

This development grew in the 1960s into what is termed the 'charismatic movement', with its emphasis on the ministry of the Spirit. Again the stress was on remaining inside existing denominational churches, whether Anglican, Baptist, Presbyterian or Methodist, and renewing or reviving them from within. This movement had a very far-reaching influence within existing Protestant institutional churches, especially in the USA, although it rapidly spread worldwide, and has left a deep mark on the UK religious scene.

Most surprising of all, in 1966/7 a major breakthrough began among American Catholics. This too has since spread far and wide, including southern Ireland.

The house church movement

It became increasingly obvious that the institutional churches would not easily abandon their denominational traditions. Thus the 'house church movement' was born. Homes were used as gathering places to develop friendship, relationships and deep commitment one to another. During the late 1960s and early 1970s this development grew apace, and fellowships of this type sprung up all over the world.

House churches differ from 'house groups' in existing churches. A house church functions as a church in its own right with recognised oversight, whereas house groups are merely meetings of an existing denominational church conducted, for whatever reason, in homes.

The shepherding teaching

In the early 1970s a teaching arose which came to influence deeply the development of a large part of the emerging house church movement. This is sometimes called 'shepherding'. It is associated with other like terms such as 'submission', 'authority', 'covering' and 'discipling'. It originated in Latin America, and spread extensively in the USA. One of the more well-known US centres of this teaching is Fort Lauderdale (Florida), led by Derek Prince, Don Basham, Bob Mumford, Ern Baxter and Charles Simpson. A magazine is produced called 'New Wine'.

2. UK developments

Post-war trends

As elsewhere, the UK also has seen an active charismatic movement. It has deeply affected all denominations since the end of World War II, whether evangelical or modernistic. An extensive house church movement has also emerged, although the shepherding teaching is not yet taken to the lengths found in the USA

The UK house church movement is not a single uniform body. It covers a variety of non-denominational charismatic groups that originally developed separately from the late 1960s onwards. Subsequently, however, many of these isolated fellowships developed more formal links of varying degrees of strength.

The most flourishing of these is the 'Harvestime' (Bradford) group which is the closest to being a denomination. The "Fulness" group, called after the title of its magazine, is a much looser federation based on long-standing personal friendships. Other recognizable groups include the Chard group and Pastor North's groups.

Before examining in more detail the distinctive doctrines and practices of the two major house churches, it must be clearly understood that there are different emphases among different groups. The Bradford and 'Fulness' leaders, for example, do not always see eye to eye. Because the house church movement is not a single uniform organisation it cannot be automatically assumed that any two groups will be identical in their practices, doctrines and outlook. There are, however, certain common strands of doctrine and practice generally found among all, and which tend to distinguish them from other evangelical/pentecostal groups.

This review does not claim to be authoritative or final. Information has been assembled primarily from an extensive reading of magazines and literature produced by the house church groups themselves (about 750 pages of it!). My own personal first-hand experience is limited. I hope, however, that this review will provide some basic factual information without which it is not easy to make an adequate assessment and to reach sensible conclusions. Much of the following information is either quoted verbatim (shown in italics), or closely reflects actual statements in house church publications.

2 THE BRADFORD ('HARVESTIME') GROUP

This is the most flourishing house church group. Up to 10,000 attend their annual Dales Week in Harrogate, Yorkshire.

Early beginnings (1945 - 1972)

From the end of the War there have been small groups seeking revival within the context of a restoration of a New Testament form of church structure. This was associated with an increasing disenchantment with existing denominational structures, which were considered as limiting or preventing the coming of the Body of Christ to full maturity. Although some of those involved had been filled with the Spirit, this was before the emergence of the charismatic movement that in the UK dates especially from 1963 onwards, the year of the commencement of the Fountain Trust.

The chief emphasis of these small groups was not so much on the baptism and gifts of the Spirit (as with the charismatic movement) as on the full recovery of all that had been lost since the early church. Occasional conferences and conventions were held which eventually led to the holding of six annual Capel Bible Weeks.

In 1972 a key meeting of six men took place at Arthur Wallis' home, initially to seek clarification on prophetic interpretation. Bryn Jones was present. During this meeting it is claimed that much prophecy was given with specific instructions for these men to be drawn together into 'committed covenant relationships' with one another, specifically committing themselves to each other's welfare, and 'covering' each other. Those present speak of this meeting leading to a breaking down of their previous independent attitudes as they saw the need of belonging to a larger body of men. Their covenant relationship is said to have been the key to a new authority and growth in their ministry. United projects were commenced. Hitherto most of them had been involved in small home groups. Henceforth they would see large numbers. The concepts of belonging, specific commitment and the breaking of individualism would become key teachings in the developing movement.

(In view of the momentous nature of the 1972 meeting, and in particular the prophecies given there, it would be extremely interesting to know the precise nature of those utterances and who gave them. This was the turning-point in the rise of the movement. To discern its origin and inspiration is crucial.)

From 1972 onwards, rapid advances were made by the newly formed fellowship. Bryn Jones, Arthur Wallis, Terry Virgo, Keri Jones, Hugh Thompson and others were recognised as chief leaders (whom they designate apostles).

Bryn Jones

Bryn Jones was born in 1940 in Abercrave, converted at 16, and a student at the Swansea Bible College from 1958-61. After evangelising in Cornwall, and with Operation Mobilisation in France, he went to Guyana for 2 1/2 years until 1966. Whilst there he helped pioneer twelve

churches using the house group approach. (This work, the 'Full Gospel Fellowship', now has about 60 churches and 4,000 believers.)

On returning to England he continued forming small house groups, firstly in Cornwall, then in Bradford. There was little progress, however, until the fateful meeting in 1972.

The Bradford house church

In 1975 three groups, which had all asked Bryn Jones to 'assume an apostolic role' towards them, amalgamated to form the Bradford 'Church House Fellowship', which has today come to give its name to the whole movement. In common with other associated churches all over the country, this church meets together on Sundays for weekly teaching and worship with more intimate daily fellowship and pastoral care provided by the area house-groups.

There are ten elders, who are mostly full-time and a full-time administrator who implements eldership decisions and ensures the smooth running of church life. Deacons are appointed by the elders for specific practical tasks (e.g. finance) or leading house-groups.

There is regular organised evangelistic outreach and personal witness. Bible teaching is regarded as vital, and there is regular ministry plus planned teaching, together with printed notes.

Commitment Class Course

New members are carefully monitored, as this is considered crucial to the quality of fellowship. A Commitment Class Course has therefore been prepared. On completion, those wishing to apply for membership and to commit themselves to the church must apply in writing. The elders consider the application and hold an interview. The outcome is not a formality. The level of commitment expected is real:

- *"we are convinced of the need to restore the quality of fellowship enjoyed by early church Christians (Acts 2:42-47)... Membership of this church means a total commitment to the body of believers..."*
- *"If you become a member of the church, you will be approached with a view to finding out how you can serve."*
- *"If you are to be part of this church, it is essential that you be willing to have some input into the meetings... there can be no sitting back.., and becoming a mere spectator."*

Tithing is explicitly taught, and, *"if you wish to become part of this church, you should ask yourself whether you are prepared to give to this level."* Water baptism is also a condition of membership.

Probably the teaching which has attracted most attention, however, is the degree of submission to the eldership which is expected. This will be examined more fully later.

Although initially prepared for the Bradford church, this course typifies the care with which new members are received into fellowship.

The Dales Weeks

Since 1976 an annual week of meetings for the whole family has been held in the Yorkshire

Showground, Harrogate. These are intended as *'a total outreach to the total family', 'envisioning people for the purposes of God for our time.'*

There are meetings for children, young teens and older people. Morning seminars are held with a heavy emphasis on the practical application of the faith. (A frequent house church complaint about evangelical preaching is that there is *"too much tendency for exposition to lack application."*) One year, for example, there were seminars on parenthood, (e.g. adolescence, children); marriage; youth (e.g. choosing a partner, sex, forming life direction); alternative living (e.g. secular employment, materialism); hang-ups (e.g. shyness, depression, forgiveness).

These weeks have proven so popular (attracting up to 10,000 people) that two other similar annual events are now held: the Downs Week and the New Forest Week. In 1983 a Welsh equivalent will be held in Builth Wells.

Overseas links

In addition to expansion in the UK several overseas links have also been established. As in the UK, 'definite committed relationships' are established. Leaders (apostles and apostolic teams) from the UK travel overseas from time-to-time for meetings and conferences with leaders with a view to developing key house church teachings: relationships in the family and in the church; developing relationships and commitment between individual ministering brethren; establishing house groups; shepherding individual lives; elders being recognised and ruling in their own church without subjection to democratic election procedures, etc.

There are now connections with groups in Italy, Uganda, Kenya, Guyana, Surinam, Norway and India.

Much of the overseas ministry is channeled through 'Supplyline', a registered charity based in Middlesbrough. The chief forms of this ministry are providing material assistance (e.g. £47,000 was donated after the Italian earthquake), and assisting overseas leaders. The emphasis is not so much on direct evangelism as on training key personnel in those areas which the Bradford group believes to be important. This is done either by 'apostolic teams' travelling overseas, or by bringing key leaders to the UK for training so that they can return and pass on what they have learned.

Bible College

A one-year International Christian Leadership Programme is held at Church House, Bradford, with special emphasis on topical themes such as: the nature of the kingdom of God, covenant relationships, Ephesians 4 ministries, etc.

Restoration magazine

There is a magazine, 'Restoratiön', commenced by Bryn Jones in 1975. The current editor is Arthur Wallis, with Bryn Jones as U.S. editor (he pastors the 'New Covenant Fellowship' in St Louis for six months a year). Teaching articles *'deal with themes about which the Holy Spirit is speaking to the church today to bring us all to the perfection God desires as seen in our Lord Jesus Christ.'*

Prophetic teaching

Although described as a teaching to which *'great importance is attached'*, the only reference to the doctrine of the Lord's promised return in the Commitment Class Course is as *'a stimulus to both evangelism and holy living'*.

The reason for this extreme brevity is quite simple: the Bradford movement does not embrace any one particular aspect of prophetic truth. Whilst believing in the personal visible return of Christ, different views are held on pre-, post- and a-millennialism. No one view is authoritative. Some therefore believe in a pre-tribulation rapture, whilst others believe the Church will go through the tribulation. Some believe in a one-phase coming both with and for the saints, whilst others teach a two-phase coming (a secret rapture followed by a post-tribulation return in glory); some look for Christ's return at any time, whilst others look first for the signs Christ gave.

Consequently, 'Restoration' reflects varying views:

- some articles speak of the declining popularity of dispensationalism. We are exhorted not to *'work out charts and calculations based on scriptures like Daniel and Revelation.... Our time would be better spent living for God and His Kingdom.'*
- We are told that the plainest meaning of the tribulation referred to in Matthew 24 is that *'there is to be a brief time of great trouble at the end of the age through which the purified church will pass.'*
- Other articles, however, state that life will simply continue as normal; there will be no great tribulation and no more false prophets than usual: *"We can await.... the conversion of the Jews. We can also expect a final brief apostasy before Christ returns. But in my understanding of Matthew 24, I do not believe there will be... the detailed signs mentioned in verses 4-34, as these.., heralded the fall of Jerusalem."*
- The idea of a 1,000 year reign of Christ after His return is questioned by remarks such as: *'Revelation 20 is interpreted by many as the spread of the Gospel and the growth of the Kingdom, Satan's powers being limited. Then for a short time Satan is released to sow darkness and deception once more.'*

Despite the lack of any clear-cut, authoritative teaching on prophecy, there is still a very real sense of prophetic destiny in this movement.

The 'Restoration' magazine is based on the conviction that God is working to fulfil John 17.21 ("that they all may be one"). This is said to be not merely a renewal but a restoration, a prophetic fulfillment of Acts 3.21 ("the times of restitution of all things"). Based on this verse, it is believed that there will be a complete restoration of all that the Church has lost which will precede, herald and finally culminate in the return of Christ.

In one very odd remark it is claimed that this restoration may be effected by a corporate Elijah (??) (Cp Matt 17.11) i.e. *"the people of God living prophetically in the freshness of kingdom life in every corner of the world.., could Elijah be here now? - a youthful Elijah perhaps, but growing rapidly... such seems likely when we consider some of the features of Elijah's ministry which mark the people of God to an ever-increasing degree today."* (This seems to be no more than a very fanciful interpretation of a beautiful passage.)

A recurring theme is the delaying of the Lord's return until the Church subjugates His foes. This is succinctly stated by Arthur Wallis: *"Let us strive to be the generation that brings back the King"* (based on 2 Peter 3.11-12). The day of His return is claimed not to be unalterably fixed; it *"depends on the present fulfillment of His Kingdom programme."*

An inseparable and major part of the expected restoration is a unity of all true believers. This is said to be achieved through Ephesians 4 ministries and the functioning together of every

member (i.e. building inter-relationships). Arthur Wallis writes: *"We must conclude (i.e. from John 17.20-23) that before Christ's return there will be a generation of Christians alive on earth who will be an expression of His prayer."* Hence, the unity of the faith will be attained.

This teaching is echoed by Bryn Jones in a review of the post-war religious scene. He says that the 1950s saw evangelistic waves in the West, followed by a great outpouring and charismatic awakening in all denominations in the 1960s. Then in the 1970s came the *"restoration message of God's order and government in the church, and the recognition of apostles and prophets as foundational, working with other ministries for the maturing of the Church."* The 1980s will see a unifying trend *"to beautify the Church for the King's return"* resulting in *"an acceleration in the breakdown of denominational exclusiveness until God's people are clearly seen to be one."* This visible unity is considered vital for the witness of the end-time Church (*"that the world may believe."*)

The sense of end-time destiny in the Bradford movement can be summed up in the words of Bryn Jones: *"We are part of a church destined to demonstrate the authority of God's rule in Christ in every part of our world by preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom in all the earth for a witness, and only then will the end come."*

It can be seen, then, how that the Bradford teachings of unity, relationships, apostles and prophets and the "Gospel of the Kingdom" are considered part of the expected full restoration which will precede the Lord's return.

Church Structures

In some denominations the forms of church structure and government are only incidental to their chief emphasis. This is emphatically not the case here.

A fundamental aspect of the Bradford vision is one single local church in each city or area. *"We believe that all God's people in each city and district will in the not-too-distant future be one, in practice as well as in theory... In the meantime we seek to build on structural principles which will pave the way for it."* The form of church structure is therefore considered crucial to an eventual attainment of "the unity of the faith," Hence there is a deliberate and conscious aim to replace existing forms of church structure with structures considered more Biblical.

Denominationalism is heartily disliked. It is clearly taught that a believer's loyalty is to the Body not to a denomination. No apology is made for those who leave existing systems to join them.

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of this structure is the heavy emphasis placed on submission and authority. Recurring terms are shepherding, discipling, the lordship of Christ and the Kingdom (or, government) of God. *"We desire the practical extension of (Jesus') rule in all the world, beginning in our city and district."* That rule is also to be displayed in the form of church government. Arthur Wallis writes: *"every true shepherd has a rod (i.e. authority)... Discipling involves the exercise of spiritual authority."* Aware of excesses and controversy in this area, accusations of "heavy shepherding", "one to one commitment" and "absolute and unconditional" submission (such as found in USA) are rejected.

An examination of the Bradford structures of church government will help show the (not unjustified) reasons for the controversy.

Apostles and Prophets

One facet of church government which arouses lively interest is the designation of certain men

within the movement as apostles and prophets. In this sphere the Bradford group is in advance of similar movements elsewhere. In Argentina (the home of the "Discipleship" teaching), for example, there is a strong emphasis on the authority of Christ and pastoral rule. The concept of apostles and prophets was, however, new to them until introduced by representatives of the Bradford movement.

It is taught (quite correctly) that apostles and prophets are not restricted to New Testament times. It is considered vital if a church is to be brought to full maturity for it to be established on the foundation of the apostles and prophets.

Apostles are described as "wise master builders" who bring revelation, strategy and envisioned leadership. A key part of their ministry in the Bradford system is their appointment of elders: *"When God begins to give anointed leadership, democracy must give way for God to have His way. The appointment of elders was an important part of the apostle's foundation-laying ministry. Without it we resort to manmade structures..."*

It is emphasised that the authority of an apostle is not legal or organisational, but spiritual. Organic links emerge between an apostle and various groups, either by pioneer evangelism or by adopting existing churches. This authority is based on mutual trust. If it is rejected, the apostle has no official course he can pursue. (In this Bradford differs sharply, for example, from the tight official control of the apostles of the Apostolic Church.)

Not all apostles are seen as having equal authority. Some, for example, operate in apostolic teams under a leading apostle who holds undisputed authority. These teams are comprised of apostles, prophets, teachers, etc., all functioning in "mutual submission."

A role which is considered important is their pastoral care of leaders, which they feel is much neglected in evangelical/pentecostal circles. (There is much emphasis on how to cope with leadership problems, and leaders' family lives.)

The existence and importance of apostles in the New Testament is irrefutable. The old pentecostal red herrings of "not calling a man an apostle lest he becomes proud" simply belie their poverty. But do Bradford's apostles bring genuine additional ministries, or are they simply already existing ministries with new titles?

The importance of the ministry of prophets in Bradford's eyes may be seen from the following: *"The new wine of the Spirit and spiritual gifts will trickle away unless people are built together on the foundation of apostles and prophets... The restoration of this ministry is an essential element in the restoration of the Church."*

The prophet "speaks into" personal and assembly situations for guidance. All such utterances are weighed. The leaders of the Bradford group claim their practice is nothing like the Apostolic Church's attitude to the prophet and prophecy. Such prophets are said to bring revelation of what God's purposes are and the practical implications.

It would be most interesting to undertake an extensive examination of this ministry as it is actually practiced in the movement. From this its spirit may be better assessed.

Elders

Each local church is ruled by a plurality of elders, though they are not all equals.

New elders are not chosen democratically (which is greatly frowned upon), but by the existing eldership, with the approval of their apostle.

Some elders are full-time; some combine their local involvement with a wider ministry and are also considered apostles, prophets, evangelists or pastor-teachers. (A distinction is drawn between an elder and the pastor-teacher of Ephesians 4.11 whose ministry is considered to be wider than one local church.)

Every elder has a specific area of responsibility in keeping with his abilities.

Based on the Bradford theory of 'delegated authority' (i.e. Christ's authority is vested in His representatives), it is strongly emphasised that the elders' rule is real, accompanied where necessary with authoritative commands. Furthermore, this rule is said not only to extend to those areas of life normally considered spiritual: *"There is no spiritual/secular distinction in Christ. Everything is under His rule."* The whole of life is therefore explicitly stated to be covered by the elders' authority: spiritual life, love and marriage, health, children, money, employment, skills etc. In reply to the question, *"Will the church leaders tell me what to do?"*, the reply is *"When necessary, yes."*

Acceptance of this authority is a requirement of membership; *"If you wish to become part of this church, you must ask yourself whether you are willing for the leaders to have this degree of discipling involvement in your life."*

Deacons

"A deacon is essentially an agent of the elders, carrying out some specific regular responsibility on their behalf and by their appointment." There are practical deacons (e.g. treasurers, administrators, social work coordinators) and pastoral deacons (housegroup leaders). There is no question of their democratic election.

House Groups

Every member belongs to an area house group. These meet weekly for worship, prayer, testimony and Bible study. They aim to foster more intimate fellowship and a closer sharing of lives in shopping, leisure, sickness etc. They often discuss the practical application of what is taught in the weekly united gathering of all such cell groups. Much emphasis is placed on proper family relationships, with wives and children in submission to the husband.

The Pyramid

The foregoing should explain why the term "the pyramid structure" is sometimes used to describe house church forms of government.

The line of authority bears some resemblance to a Catholic hierarchical structure:

- children and wives submit to husbands;
- husbands submit to housegroup leaders (deacons);
- deacons submit to elders (who appoint them); elders submit to apostles (who confirm their appointment); and
- apostles within a team submit to the particular apostle who has undisputed authority.

At present there are no legal or official bonds to enforce this structure. A church could choose to disregard an apostle for example, and no official action could be taken. Nonetheless there are certainly those who have been involved in house churches who speak of a bondage of spirit.

In coming to a proper assessment of this movement, a clear discernment is needed of the spirit and origin of the repeated emphasis on submission and authority. There is clearly much scope for abuse in the repeated emphasis of these themes. There is also much similarity with Catholic apologists' justification of priestly and episcopal rule and domination.

The house church 'covering' theme seems to have somewhat of a threatening tone to it. Those who reject the so-called 'covering' of their leaders are said to be open to satanic attacks which submission could have guaranteed protection from. Such Nicolaitan ideas can and do bring about great psychological pressure and bondage of spirit.

The crucial question is this: What spirit originated the submission doctrine? To uncover this is to go to the roots of the whole system.

Relationships

A constant Bradford movement complaint is what they consider the overemphasis on theological teaching in evangelical/pentecostal churches coupled with a lack of practical application in the ordinary situations of life, such as employment, marriage, children, finance, etc.

With them much emphasis is put on proper family relationships. (There is even a Family and Home supplement to 'Restoration' magazine.) Seminars are regularly arranged for church leaders and others on practical home situations. Issues covered include authority in the home, communicating, teenage problems, resolving difficulties, discipling children, unconverted partners, being single, working mothers, etc.

According to Bryn Jones, evangelicals have long '*emphasised personal salvation and the individual aspects of the Christian life, but suddenly the Holy Spirit is teaching us about corporateness and community. We are beginning to see that the church is all about relationships*'. It is repeatedly stressed that loners need to relate to others for greater effectiveness: '*The Kingdom must come, but that means a body joined and knit together.*' Therefore relationships must be given great attention. '*Relationships are the very essence of church life, and if these are not healthy and strong that body of Christians will never function effectually for God.*' Repeated stress is laid on growing into one another as well as into God.

The application of these ideas is extremely detailed and practical. Teaching is devoted to restoring relationships, honesty and frank confession, critical spirits, overcoming fears, inferiority and guilt complexes, shyness, insecurity, friendship, resentments, depression, overcoming hurts and childhood memories, etc.

Directly related to the foregoing is the reiteration of the importance of cooperation not competition, teamwork, loyalty and submission to one another.

In view of the constant probing of the inner depths of the personality, it is not surprising that attention is given to the subject of demonic oppression and possession. One of the chief Bradford group leaders, Hugh Thompson, clearly spells out his view on the controversial issue of whether or not a Christian may be possessed as follows: "*Most evangelicals, including pentecostals, insist that a Christian cannot have a demon)but few offer any clear Biblical reason. I can see at least three simple reasons for satanic bondage in Christians:*

- a *persistent yielding to temptation and habitual carnality*
- b *wrong reaction to a traumatic experience*
- c *hangovers from pre-conversion days.*"

Luke 13:10-16 is quoted as justification.

Some categories of spirits he refers to are: religious, occult, unclean, spirits causing allergies and spirits coming through parental overshadowing (i.e. emotional pressure from another human).

The New Birth

The Bradford doctrine on salvation by faith and assurance would be acceptable to all evangelicals. Particular emphasis is (not unsurprisingly) laid on the lordship of Christ, and submission to Him as King. *"The gospel we preach is not only the gospel of the grace of God, but also the gospel of the Kingdom, or -the 'gospel of God's government'."*

The aim is not just to see individual salvation, but new converts who come into God's Kingdom i.e. under His rule, as expressed via His delegated authority.

Water Baptism

Baptism by immersion is clearly taught. This is stressed, perhaps more than by some evangelicals today, as an acknowledgement of Christ's lordship which should follow conversion more or less immediately. It is also a condition of membership.

One notable feature is the teaching that new converts *"receive at their baptism a spiritual circumcision, or a circumcision of the heart"*. (Colossians 2. 11-12 is quoted.) This suggests a confusion of water baptism with baptism into the body of Christ.

Baptism in the Holy Spirit

The baptism in the Holy Spirit subsequent to conversion, is explicitly taught to empower all believers. On the issue of tongues as the initial evidence of baptism, the following sums up their teaching very well: *"You do not have to speak in tongues, but.., you can do, and will do, provided you do not let fear and prejudice hinder... So expect to speak in tongues... Henceforth there will be no doubts as to whether or not we are filled with the Spirit."*

The Quiet Time

In the Commitment Course, Bible study courses are said to be a regular feature of church life. Although this movement is more Biblically-orientated than some house groups, there is still periodical reference, as in other house church circles, to *"the bondage of the quiet time"*. (If the quiet time is a bondage, it says more about the state of the individual believer than the quiet time!)

In one "Restoration" article we are told that once *"the quiet time was imposed on Christians in many evangelical circles almost as a legal obligation"*. In their reaction against this supposed "bondage" the danger is then admitted of the pendulum going to the other extreme.

This danger is further implied by Keri Jones, brother of Bryn Jones, who wrote *"Don't be*

deceived by those who say that prayer is 'old hat' and that you don't need to give a certain amount of time or to have a set time with God."

Evangelism

The Commitment Class Course states clearly, "*An inward looking church soon becomes stagnant*". Reference is made to the need for personal witness, and periodic planned outreach. Despite this, however, the very strong emphasis on developing relationships with other believers has tended to limit evangelistic activity. The Commitment Class notes state: "*We aim to demonstrate His love to each member of the family of God. This starts in the home, overflows to the church and eventually reaches out to the world...*" (emphasis mine.) In one "Restoration" article it is openly admitted that in drastically reducing meetings so as to deepen relationships, the pendulum has often gone to the other extreme of forgetting outreach altogether.

Even when outreach does take place, it must not be assumed this necessarily takes the form to which evangelicals are accustomed. One such outreach, for example, took the form of a barn dance.

In practice, hitherto it seems that the majority of new members of the house churches comprise those who are dissatisfied with their existing churches, rather than new converts. Furthermore, this does not always appear to be without the active encouragement of individual house groups.

The gifts of the Spirit

These are emphasised: "*Christian life and service cannot realise its full potential without them.*" All are encouraged to develop their own gifts.

In practice, of course, the only way to assess such manifestations will be through actual experience of them. Until then, final judgement must be reserved. (My own limited experience thus far has not impressed me.)

Praise and Worship

This plays a vital part in the movement, and frequent meetings are arranged solely for this. Dancing is also encouraged, and practices are held so as to train members to take part. (Certain forms of dancing are not considered wrong apart from specifically religious dancing.)

3 THE "FULNESS" GROUP

Origins and later developments

Although this group is not in fellowship with the Bradford group, there are many similarities in teaching and practice, and much that has been said already will apply here also.

The "Fulness" group (so named because of the title of its now discontinued magazine) is a loose federation of church leaders based on longstanding personal friendships. Significant figures include Gerald Coates, John Noble, Maurice Smith, Nick Butterworth, John MacLaughlan, Graham Perrins and George Tarleton.

Gerald Coates, who is considered one of the apostles of the movement, is based at the Cobham Christian Fellowship, Surrey. He was brought up in a very strict Brethren assembly, but after leaving following a split he came to accept the baptism in the Spirit in the late 1960s. He then began holding meetings in his own home. Others joined so that the Fellowship is now around 400 people from a town of 13,000.

The Cobham church has three elders whom Gerald Coates regularly meets for counsel. Weekly united gatherings are held on Thursdays with all other activities, such as breaking of bread, being held in house groups. Periodical evangelistic meetings are held using music and drama and a ten-minute address. Missionaries and some UK ministering brethren are supported. Gerald Coates himself ministers to about ten other fellowships.

Maurice Smith spent some ten years in Canterbury "Honour Oak" fellowship until 1965 when he professes to have received the Holy Spirit. He then met Graham Perrins and others who taught that the Spirit was emphasising the home as the centre of spiritual activity. By 1969, together with John Noble and others, he had commenced the Ilford-Romford house fellowship. (Gerald Coates has acknowledged his links with this fellowship and its influence upon him during his own formative years in the emerging "Fulness" group.)

Nick Butterworth, another of the leaders, once led some young Baptists, but after meeting John Noble and Maurice Smith, he "*found the covering and encouragement for his leadership to blossom.*" He later left the Baptists so as to "*commit himself more fully*" to these two men. By 1978 he met regularly with the London leaders and the Fulness team and became deeply involved in building relationships with local church leaders.

Graham Perrins from Cardiff was The first editor of "Fulness" magazine. (Later Gerald Coates took over as Director, and Nick Butterworth became editor.) Like "Restoration" magazine, it became a vehicle for diffusing house church teachings and practices, with a readership beyond its own borders. The Elim Youth Department magazine "Bread", for example, has been deeply influenced by "Fulness."

Graham Perrins left the editorship of "Fulness" to devote himself, together with John MacLaughlan, to the publication of "Proclaim!" This was a bi-monthly produced over two years devoted to the theme of prophecy and prophets, a subject of particular interest to these two men.

As with the Bradford Group, periodical seminars and festivals are held. In 1978, for example, a "Kingdom Life Festival" was held in Cobham. There were optional seminars on wholefoods, dieting, car maintenance, music, drama and (even!) Bible studies. Local trips were arranged, and sessions on creative worship (i.e. practiced dancing) and prophetic teaching were held. There were times of worship, dance, drama, Bible study and teaching on "response to God" in

movement, dance, drama, etc.

A large national meeting called "The Banquet" has been arranged in Wembley arena in May 1983, as usual with much emphasis on music. (It is billed as "A feast of music and praise".) A similar event in 1982 attracted over 11,000 people. Periodically local meetings of this type are also arranged. In Cardiff, for example, meetings have been arranged since 1981 for "worship and fellowship" to which all believers are invited. Musicians such as Dave Bilbrough play a major part; speakers include people like Gerald Coates. In the past these "Praise God Together" meetings have also been accompanied by street drama, which is intended to be a form of evangelistic outreach (?!) and is something which is explicitly encouraged.

A noteworthy development in house church movements is the trend towards involvement in commercial activities. John Noble and Nick Butterworth, for example, have recently formed a Christian postal shopping business. (Likewise, the Bradford Church runs the "Harvestime" press and a mail order firm.)

Prophetic teaching

As with the Bradford group, no one school of prophetic interpretation is explicitly taught to the exclusion of all others. There is consequently a confusion over what end-time developments to expect. Despite the unwillingness to make any clear-cut statement on prophecy (partly due to the varied denominational backgrounds of the membership), there is a definite antipathy towards many of the usual evangelical/pentecostal views. Frequently, for example, the term "the rapture" will be looked down upon.

John MacLaughlan is a regular writer on prophetic themes in "Fulness". In writing on the Millennium, for example, he says that this need not be a literal 1,000 years. He echoes a recurring house-church theme when he writes that it is wrong to try and fit the coming of the kingdom into a "*fixed time-scale, a predetermined chronological prophetic programme. The consummation will come when a people emerge who so enter into Christ's victory that they rule and reign with Him.*" In other words, the Lord's return in the power of His Kingdom is not to be on a date already fixed in heaven; it is conditional upon God's people first coming to display the reality of the Kingdom.

John MacLaughlan also writes of a "*discredited dispensationalism*" with its "*fables of Jewish restoration, a reign from a literal Jerusalem, and a restored sacrificial system.*" For him natural Israel will never be mended again; they have forfeited their promises and their fulfillment will be seen in a remnant incorporated in the Church. In short, there is a major reappraisal of the usual evangelical/pentecostal teaching on the Second Coming and the sequence of events leading to it. The church is seen as heir of the promises of literal Israel.

Sometimes the confusing vagueness on prophetic themes can be particularly disturbing. One of the top leaders, John Noble, for example, professed himself not very clear on many aspects of eternal judgement and how to explain them. When writing on this theme as part of a series on "the end of the age", he confined himself primarily to present self-judging and judging of others rather than to the future.

The house-church movement greatly emphasises a radical approach to inherited evangelical/pentecostal beliefs and practices. It sometimes seems as if the mere fact that the latter may have believed a particular truth is grounds for it to be called into question.

Despite the lack of positive instruction on the details of the second coming, there is, nevertheless, a strong emphasis on the place of the house church movement in God's overall purposes. According to Gerald Coates, for example, the charismatic movement is the main

thrust of God's work today. It is a renewal in the gifts, praise and worship, relationships and submission. It is the ushering in of a new age, the final generation of believers who will overcome death itself. This is a transition period which will culminate in the attaining of the unity of the faith.

A great awakening is expected before Christ's return. John MacLaughlan explains what that means in practice: *"a generation is being matured for the fulfillment of all God's heart and purpose... God's society will be manifest among men..., by this means His Kingdom rule will be established on the earth...; envisioned by the Holy Ghost through the prophetic word, they are receiving Kingdom authority"*. In other words, they do not just await the coming kingdom, they believe they are to introduce and reveal it. The present charismatic/house-church movement is considered very significant; it is viewed as bringing heaven to earth, ushering in the new age, bringing in God's order and establishing His rule(or kingdom).

Perhaps this will help explain further the constantly recurring house-church themes of the Gospel of the kingdom and establishing and displaying the kingdom. It also throws light on the central role of submission to delegated authority in house-church theology. John Noble for example claims that it is order or government that constitutes a church.

Since Jesus has delegated His government (i.e. rule or kingdom) to church leaders, the church is a microcosm of the kingdom of heaven on earth. John MacLaughlan therefore writes that for kingdom rule to be established on earth, not only the Holy Spirit but also God-given leadership are needful: *"Full acceptance of... leadership...(is) necessary."*

The vision of God's purpose and glory is declared to be the overall goal of the movement, but *"only under God-given leadership."* This is the significance of "the Lordship of Christ" theme in house-church teaching.

The Kingdom of God and Submission

As just explained, authority and submission are fundamental in the "Fulness" movement. According to Coates, *"the basic issue in the Church at present is obedience. We must come under God's authority. To obey Christ involves obedience to others."* This also explains the house church emphasis on discipleship: according to Coates we are not just disciples of Christ, but of our leaders. *"All proper submission God sees as submission to Himself. For to obey the Lord is also to obey those established by the Lord."* Therefore he teaches that we should follow not only Christ but our shepherds, submitting our problems with children, partners or money to them. Thereby the kingdom will be established: the kingdom of God's rule and authority. In a similar vein, the elders of the Ilford-Romford fellowship wrote in 1972 that submission to leadership is necessary to enjoy the benefits of kingdom life. (Based on identical logic that when husbands/fathers take their authority in the home, by so doing God is put on the throne and His kingdom (i.e. authority) brought right clown into everyday family life).

It is not difficult to understand in the light of the foregoing the repeated mention of discipleship, authority and submission to leaders. Independent works are frowned upon, whether free-lance missionaries or evangelists, independent mission halls, or individualism in a particular believer. Individual wills and self interests must *"defer to and recognise an authority greater than themselves."* The kingdom is thus displayed by acknowledgement of delegated authority: *"There will be no kingdom except the government be upon His shoulders. Except that authority be tangible and discernible, how can we say: the kingdom of God is at hand?"*

(How does this accord with the disciples' proclamation of the kingdom at hand? They were sent to manifest the powers and authority of the kingdom by the Spirit rather than to insist that others submit to themselves. They did not claim that the kingdom would come provided their

authority was acknowledged. They carried the kingdom with them through the Spirit.)

In view of this teaching it is quite clear why Fulness leaders call for specific commitment to themselves by those who wish to join them and their fellowships. Much emphasis is placed on the preparation and training of those who will lead others. Courage is repeatedly enjoined to rule in families and churches. Coates exhorts leaders to have sinews of steel to take up their authority. We are told that leaders need *“to be given authority... to make decisions without constant reference to a committee.”*

We are also told that finances should be brought to such trusted leaders. According to “Fulness” we do not need to seek specific guidance as to the direction of our money, but simply to commit it to the leaders.

Apostles and Prophets

As with the Bradford group, the present-day existence of apostles is taught. (To head off embarrassing questions, however, we are told that these need not be of the calibre of Paul.)

Their task, together with prophets, is said to be to lay foundations for the proper establishing of churches. These should not be built on pastors, teachers or evangelists, but on apostles and prophets. Furthermore, according to Coates, it is the apostles themselves, not just their teaching, that churches are built on. (This further enhances the house church emphasis on the central role of leaders.) He claims the church is built on and around men. These men bring out the gifts and abilities of others, coordinating the building together of the people of God.

Particular attention is devoted to the ministry of prophets. In the “Proclaim” broadsheet, articles are found on their appearance throughout church history and on other related topics. A conference was held in Cardiff in July 1981 on prophets and prophecy.

It is difficult to reach a definitive conclusion on the reality of the prophetic ministry in this movement without much wider experience. Great unease is, however, aroused by remarks such as the following by John MacLaughlan, who has a particular interest in prophecy and is considered to be a prophet by some: *“Within your capacity and faith, speak out yourself. Expect God within you to say something through you. Just a few simple words, expressing what you sense God is saying, can change lives.”* My limited experience of charismatic prophesying hitherto has not impressed me, and this type of remark does not help.

Relationships

The theme of the Kingdom is linked closely with the repeated house-church emphasis on relationships: *“The Kingdom of God is most clearly expressed where Christians are living together in harmony.”* *“The Church is the inter-relationship of the people living together within the confines of God’s order.”* What this means is that God’s rule (i.e. order or kingdom) is revealed when Christians properly relate with one another under the delegated authority of fathers/husbands, elders and apostles.

Close relationships and fellowship between believers are considered absolutely vital. Indeed, this is the very essence of why house fellowships exist: the home (as opposed to church meetings) is considered the centre of spiritual life. Very close relationships are encouraged by means such as breakfasting and relaxing together. It is taught that the emphasis should be on family life rather than church activity: another reason for the practice of house meetings.

According to “Fulness” magazine, the desire for fellowship is one of the most urgent being

expressed by Christians today. *“Coming together for fellowship and finding each other in greater depth is still what is on God’s heart at the moment.”* The same idea of building relationships as part of the particular work of the Spirit today is echoed by Coates, who writes of “the current emphasis on things like community, financial sharing, having all things in common, submission to authority, friendship, genuine caring and love for one another...”

House groups tend to be kept small since it is considered difficult to develop deep and continuing relationships with a large number. Indeed, it is sometimes said that a deep bond of really satisfying depth can only exist with perhaps two or three others. This is why, as groups grow in size, they are further sub-divided.

As with the Bradford group, a very full measure of commitment is expected: *“Christian relationships can only function where there’s commitment to one another.”* In an open letter from the elders of the Ilford-Romford fellowship in 1972 this is expressed very plainly: *“Anyone consistently coming (particularly on a Sunday) from a sense of duty, or who is unrelated to the family, will be asked to seriously consider where their real commitment lies.”* Exclusion from fellowship (as opposed to membership) is practiced where considered necessary.

It is thus clear that these are very tightly knit fellowships. This together with the hierarchical structure of authority thus provides abundant scope for a papal/clerical spirit to wreak havoc.

The Lord’s Supper

Directly linked to the issue of relationships is the understanding and practice of the Lord’s supper. According to Coates many have stopped practising the evangelical/pentecostal format as they cannot see its meaning. These now almost daily go from house to house sharing meals, leading to what Coates calls *“a healthy restoration of believers eating, drinking and praying together, sharing their lives in Christ and being God’s alternative society.”*

He claims there is no basis for a weekly gathering of all believers in one locality since there is no place big enough. Therefore breaking of bread meetings are held in the house groups in the Cobham Christian Fellowship.

According to MacLaughlan, the breaking of bread is a meal which anticipates the coming Kingdom. For him, eating together in family and fellowship with the Church is an integral part of the Kingdom fellowship of the new age. In it we declare who we are and where we are going: people of the new covenant, enjoying and anticipating the Kingdom of God. He warns against *“replacing the meal by the special act with bread and wine,”* and also against *“artificially imposing this special act on a meal so that it appears odd and out of place.”*

Whilst it is irrefutable that the Lord’s supper in New Testament times was part of a proper meal, it was far more than that. In the house church movement’s radical reassessment of all existing religious practices, however, they appear to have reduced it to a mere communal meal. The best Coates can manage in his treatment of its full significance is to say: *“the Lord’s supper may be more than simply sharing a meal...”* (emphasis mine).

Evangelism

There is an absence of many conventional forms of evangelism amongst house churches such as tracting, door-to-door, crusades and gospel services. (Indeed, many who practiced these in their previous denominational churches, now decry them.) Coates acknowledges that there is no great evangelistic burden, although he claims this is no less than among other conventional evangelical believers.

One reason for this state of affairs is the house-churches' central preoccupation. The heavy emphasis on relationships and being built up in Christ and into one another has led to a marked shift from personal and church evangelism. In 'the Cobham Fellowship, for example, no Sunday evening evangelistic service is held. Occasional "friendship meetings" are held instead.

This is the direct result of explicit house church teaching. Coates, for instance, writes that *"the prime task of God's people is not to evangelise, but to be worthy to evangelise."* In the Ilford-Romford open letter, reference is made to the emergence of *"a happy, healthy and secure people who have something to say in evangelism, and who can begin to take in the needy, the widow and the orphan. At present, sad to say, this is just not possible"* (emphasis mine). The theme recurs in another remark of Coates: *"as we become more whole within ourselves, we see both evangelists and the whole church willingly and gladly live out...the Lordship of Christ... rather than have a programme imposed upon us"* (emphasis mine).

Whilst justifying the current low priority given to evangelistic outreach on the grounds of not yet being properly equipped, periodic references do occur to anticipated developments in the future. Over the next ten years Coates expects a *"whole new concept of evangelism"* to arise. Among other things, this will include what Bob Gillman calls *flowing "out on the streets singing."* Whatever the precise form of this future expectation, the "Fulness" movement believes the present emphasis on submission and relationships will prepare the way for it.

Very scant reference is ever found in "Fulness" to overseas missionary work, except for digs at existing works and the missionary call and emphasis on the need for missionary workers to be submitted to a local church.

(The Bradford group, incidentally, appears to be more evangelistically and missionary conscious than "Fulness" in practice, whilst still sharing a similar underlying ideology.)

Dancing

Music and drama play a significant role in that evangelism which does take place at the present time. Reference is made in "Fulness" magazines to dancing, miming and acting out in public places, as opposed to in gatherings of believers.

There are also references in "Fulness" to dancing *"for pure enjoyment, for God wants us to enjoy life"*, and to *"bopping for the sheer fun of it"*, without any worship or evangelistic intentions. Maurice Smith on one occasion relates his experiences at a wedding disco when he joined in the dancing, singing at the top of his voice in tongues. He remarked that: *"Christians don't dance was one of the first chains put on me when I became a Christian."*

In addition to dancing for pleasure and for evangelistic purposes, "Fulness" refers frequently to its role in worship, *"to celebrate life; to respond to what we know of God."* Such dancing is often said to be prophetic since it responds to God's revealed will. This type of *dancing "Calls for much preparation and practice"* (i.e. it is not spontaneous). John MacLaughlan writes of the need to *"practice developing motifs or musical fragments to express particular moods, events, persons. Then translate the experience of God into musical language and physical movements... Take God's word as expressed in ministry, prophecy..., and transform it into music and dance. Play it out, and dance it out!"*

In keeping with these ideas, dancing motions are taught in some house churches. They resemble creative dancing.

Law and Grace

According to Coates, many evangelical/pentecostal churches have a basic misunderstanding of the grace of God which results in legalism and a lack of joy: *“There is little difference today between the average evangelical and the old covenant Jew.”* He claims we should be motivated by the inner Spirit, not a set of rules; the spiritual man has the law in his heart.

Theologically, of course, these ideas are sound. The important thing, however, is to examine how these broad principles are interpreted in practice. Thereby, we understand the nature of the spirit which motivates those involved.

There are numerous references in “Fulness” magazine to the need for a reassessment of established evangelical values through a fresh understanding of grace. Among examples given of this supposed legalistic bondage are: cinema attendance, reading secular literature, dancing, women wearing trousers, going to the beach or public houses, having a glass of wine, etc. Frequent emphasis is laid upon enjoying life, with digs at various forms of what are considered bondage.

For instance, Coates claims that the reason it is recorded on one occasion that Jesus rose early to pray is that this was unusual for Him. (Is such prayer a bondage to the inner spirit of the writer?) Hints are made about enjoying our food and a drink of wine instead of fasting.

The theme of “be yourself; trust your inner life” often crops up, and in very illuminating contexts. At the beginning of Nick Butterworth’s house group, for example, it was decided *“to have no more outward form than our internal life could support.”* Consequently they held no formal services, only meetings with friends for a meal or a walk. When regular weekly meetings were finally commenced, a chapter of “Wind in the Willows” was: read for several weeks! In other house groups the inner life leads them simply to meet for tea and then to play Scrabble or Monopoly on Sunday evenings. In others the “fellowship” takes the form of watching the TV together. (They would have far more fellowship if they turned it off!)

The same law and grace theme recurs in references to bickering over Sunday observance, traditions, the Second Coming and food and drink. Sunday is not considered a special day, and if the weekly gathering of the church is held on a Sunday, this is said to be only because of convenience. In other instances it is held on a weeknight, and Sunday is used as a family day, or as an opportunity for united picnics or other leisure activities.

The Quiet Time

Another disquieting indication of the nature of the “inner life” which inspires some is the frequent reference to “the old quiet time kind of bondage.”

Coates claims that God does not demand daily reading of the Bible, and, as already mentioned, undermines the practice of regular, private, sacrificial prayer. According to him, Jesus normally *“just carried on living enjoying the fulness of the Holy Spirit in the company of His disciples.”* Very interestingly, these remarks are made in an article entitled “Being Yourself.” Clearly to love regular meditation in the Word and private communion with God inhibits some professing Christians from being themselves. If the Word and prayer are a bondage, it is a reflection on the believer, not on the quiet time!

4 CONCLUSION & EVALUATION

The ideas which are found in the house church movement are today having an influence far beyond their own borders, both in the UK and overseas. Many individuals and churches not formally linked to the Bradford, "Fulness" or other house groups have nonetheless embraced many of the practices and teachings prevalent amongst them. The style of worship (including dance and drama), the formation of small cell- groups meeting in homes, and the re-examination by many of their system of church government are but some areas of influence.

The UK Pentecostal denominations have been much exercised over these trends, and extensive consideration has been given to them. Many of their members have been attracted by the vitality of the growing movement, including several pastors and leaders. Clifford Beasley, for example, withdrew from the AOG to become apostle to the West Midlands in the Bradford group.

Because of the extensive influence of the house church movement,

- AoG held a conference at Swanwick in November 1982 to sound out the feelings of its ministers on the whole theme.
- Elim has also given much time in its 1981/82/83 annual conferences to the house church issue and in particular to the method of appointment of local church leaders. There has been considerable pressure to amend its constitution so as to introduce elders and deacons on the Bradford pattern.

Both movements are currently still in a state of flux with periodic reports of ministers and members leaving to join existing house churches or to form new ones. In addition many churches which have remained within the existing AoG/ Elim structures have absorbed much of the spirit of the house church movement.

It is not easy to give a simple one-sentence evaluation of the house church movement. It is a mingling of many differing attitudes, teachings and denominational backgrounds.

For example, despite foolish references to "the bondage of the quiet time", it is still possible to hear a house church preacher saying he is old-fashioned enough to believe in the quiet time. Some of their worship/praise gatherings can be a most odd mixture of sincere worship and nothing less than plain worldly-spirited (and frequently deafening!) music with religious words.

A particularly disturbing feature is the submission/authority theme. The Bradford leaders in a recent meeting with certain members of the AoG Executive Council claimed to have no links with the USA (apart from Bryn Jones's church in St. Louis) and in particular with Fort Lauderdale. Whatever the present state of specific covenant relationships between Bradford leaders and the Fort Lauderdale Five, however, it is undeniable that there are links of common teachings, and that many Bradford ideas such as submission originated there. Ern Baxter, one of Fort Lauderdale leaders, has also been invited to preach in the Dales Week convention.

Whatever attempts may be made to justify Biblically the submission/discipleship/ shepherding ideas, and their application in church government, I am more interested in the inspiration spirit originating and motivating them. This evaluation has been limited to the house church movement in the UK. In the USA, where the Lordship of Christ via delegated authority theme has been taken much further, the pyramid structure of authority so developed provides an ideal channel for a clerical/ papal antichrist spirit. This is the reason for my repeated emphasis on the need to discern the originating spirit of the modern submission doctrine. This is

absolutely fundamental to a proper evaluation of the house church movement.

A repeated emphasis of this movement is its sense of end-time prophetic destiny. It has a vision of a glorious Bride come to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ. This understandably attracts many who seek more than most evangelical/pentecostal churches seem capable of offering. Nonetheless, based on my present knowledge and experience, for me this movement is not the answer to what many of the Lord's people are seeking in their quest for the depths of God. Although the house church movement conveys an awareness of something beautiful in the air soon to come, it is not itself that something. It could even be that this movement will either sidetrack or turn away many from the real thing when it does come. Its governmental structures make it very easy for a very few key leaders to direct the affairs and opinions of many thousands of people should that which God does not conform to their expectations.

If the so-called "classical" pentecostal movement wishes to meet the valid aspirations of those who cry out for living water, many of whom are giving serious consideration to the house church movement, there will have to be significant changes. Simply to defend established practices is not good enough. Change must only be resisted if it is a question of upholding the Truth; Pentecostal traditions are no more sacrosanct than Catholic ones.

On the other hand the frenzied quest to keep in with every new religious fad and fashion only belies the spiritual poverty of those so blown about. We need leaders who are steeped in the Spirit of God and who come from His Presence with the present-day mind of God, not men who are mere purveyors of every contemporary religious trend and wind of doctrine. If the Pentecostal movement had the measure of the Spirit it once knew, it would not have many of the problems it has today in knowing how to respond to the challenge of the house church movement, and in being able to quench the spiritual thirst of its members.

To conclude, for me the house church movement is a hybrid, a mingling of different spirits and aspirations, some good and some bad.

Many of its teachings are at first sight Biblically based, offering a more Scriptural approach than found in most existing denominational or non-denominational churches. Thus, many sincere people who seek more of God are attracted thereby.

First appearances, however, can be deceptive. Simply to meet in a home (as opposed to a church building) will no more reproduce the Spirit of the early church than wearing raiment of camel's hair and a leather girdle will cause us to be endued with the Spirit and power of Elijah. The fellowship of the Spirit between believers is not mere socialising. It is unlikely that early church house meetings were for the purpose of playing Monopoly, watching the TV, or reading "Wind in the Willows". Likewise, I wonder what resemblance there is between David's dancing and playing before the Lord and the practiced creative dancing of the house church movement. It is insufficient merely to copy the wording of the Bible; it is necessary also to have the Spirit of that wording. Otherwise the end-product is nothing less than a counterfeit, posing as the real thing.

The house church movement claims to be ushering in God's glorious climax. This is not the case. That climax is yet to come.

John L Birkin

March/April 1983

THE HOUSE CHURCH MOVEMENT

UPDATE 1986

My original review of the House Church movement was written three years ago in March/April 1983. As this is a rapidly developing movement it is not surprising that some of the factual information written then has been overtaken by events (even though this was based primarily on literature produced by the two main house church groups themselves).

As more research into this movement takes place, a clearer and more detailed picture is emerging of its different branches and historical origins. I have found Andrew Walker's book "Restoring the Kingdom" (Hodder, £5.95) particularly useful. This is an account of its history, beliefs, leaders and methods written in a fair, non-controversial manner. I heartily recommend it as the best book I am presently aware of to give a useful overall survey of the whole scene.

As mentioned in my original article, that review did not claim to be authoritative or final. At that time I felt it was necessary to arrive at some informed conclusions on the recent and rapidly spreading phenomenon of the house church movement. Such conclusions need to be based on accurate factual information rather than sensational or heavily biased rumours.

The reason for this update is simply to try to keep the original article as factually accurate as possible. The reader can then form his conclusions on the basis of reliable, factual information.

(Inevitably of course this update will itself no doubt soon be overtaken by subsequent developments, since it is dealing with such a fluid situation. But I hope it still provides a useful guide for a spiritual evaluation of this important contemporary movement).

The Charismatic renewal /House Church restorationist distinction

The difference between the charismatic renewal movement and the house church movement was perhaps not made sufficiently clear in the review of post war religious developments in the original article.

The renewal movement believed that the existing traditional churches (whether Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian or whatever) could be spiritually renewed by charismatic gifts. In other words, it was a renewal of existing structures. No new movement was envisaged. The emphasis was on unity in the Spirit, whilst accepting differences in doctrine. Undoubtedly the charismatic renewal affected many lives, but it left the denominations essentially unchanged.

During this period some were either forced to leave those denominations, or felt they could not remain within and be faithful to God. This led to the formation of numerous independent house churches. Among them were some who followed what came to be known as the restoration movement.

Their attitude to the gifts of the Spirit was much more radical. Their widespread acceptance was seen as only one aspect of an overall plan of God to restore all things to his Church. This involved more than just the gifts. The complete structure of the churches had to be radically re-examined to comply with the original. Where necessary, as the vision of full restoration grew in

the 1960s and 1970s, this would mean the cutting down of existing denominational structures root and branch.

The following summary may help to highlight the chief distinctions:

- The house church movement is not the same as the charismatic renewal movement (which is within existing churches).
- The majority of house churches are independent of the various evolving groupings,
- The Bradford and Fulness groupings are not the only ones. There are also those linked with South Chard, Pastor North, the Ichthus Fellowship, Good News Crusade, Stanley Jebb, etc.
- Not all house churches are automatically restorationist in outlook, even though many are.

Different strands within the Restorationist House Church movement

In the original review of the restorationist branch of the UK use church movement I mentioned that it was not a single uniform body. The two groups used to illustrate were the Bradford (Harvestime) group and the group that I named after its former magazine, "Fulness".

As a result of the researches of Andrew Walker it is clear that I have not drawn sufficient attention to the differences between these two groups. Also there have been developments within each of the two groups which make some of my original remarks out of date.

i) Early Beginnings

The key meeting at Arthur Wallis's home in 1972 was initially to discuss end-time prophecy. He believed that the end-time was not a period of disaster, but of the restoration of a glorious church. (This ran counter to the common evangelical/pentecostal view of an ever-worsening world situation accompanied by a religious decline climaxing in the falling-away just prior to Christ's return.)

The original ones who met were six: Arthur Wallis, Peter Lyne, Bryn Jones, David Mansell, Graham Perrins and Hugh Thompson. As a result of a prophecy by Bryn Jones that a seventh should be added, John Noble was invited to later meetings. Following numerous personal prophecies they became convinced that they were already exercising prophetic and apostolic functions, They also developed close, committed covenant relationships with one another, and with a further seven who were added: George Tarleton, Gerald Coates, Barney Coombs, Maurice Smith, Ian McCullough, John MacLaughlan and Campbell McAlpine.

ii) The division between the two large groups

During the years 1972 to 1974 the leadership structure of the house church/restoration movement developed. But the early links between leaders only lasted three or four years.

By 1976 there had been a major split between what became the Bradford group (primarily Bryn Jones and Arthur Wallis) and the key figures in the "Fulness" group (John Noble, Maurice Smith, Gerald Coates and Graham Perrins). Although no single issue brought about the parting of the ways, a major factor was the issue of law and grace. The "Fulness" group has a more lax attitude towards traditional standards of holiness and separation.

iii) Developments within the two groups

The Bradford (Harvestime) Group

As already stated, the whole house church/restorationist movement is in a state of flux, Changes and new developments are constantly in train. Some examples qualifying the original article are as follows:

- Despite the movement's strong emphasis on home groups, the cells in Bradford were suspended in 1984 since people were becoming too attached to them to the detriment of the church as a whole.
- In 1983 Bryn Jones ended his American pastorate in St. Louis and returned to Bradford for good. This seemed to end all formal links with American house church trends, including the Fort Lauderdale five (whose basic discipleship teachings came from Ortiz of Argentina). (From 1979 on none of the five has been invited to the Dales convention, although Ern Baxter had spoken in 1975 to 1977, and Bob Mumford in 1978.)
- On page 10 of my original article reference is made to Hugh Thompson's remarks on Christians being possessed. A pastor friend informs me that since this time Thompson (in common with Bryn Jones) does not now accept that a Christian can be possessed.
- From 1983 on the massive Dales Week was reorganised by beginning smaller weeks in different regions, and evangelistic campaigns were begun in large towns, (A major criticism of the house churches has been sheep stealing and the lack of evangelistic outreach). In 1984 for example, short outreaches were held in Birmingham, Leicester and Leeds. In addition GO! Team Ministries has recently been launched with dozens of young people engaged in a year's church-based evangelism and training. Teams will be working in London, Bath, Cardiff, Swansea, Hereford, Leicester, Liverpool, Sheffield and Manchester during 1985/86. Door-to-door evangelism, sketchboards, street drama, and mime are all used. Cars have been purchased and houses to accommodate team members. All administration and direction is provided by the local church elders.
- A serious division took place in 1982 when David Tomlinson (a pioneer in the N.E. and Midlands) and his churches severed their links with Bryn Jones, Differences were more a question of style, method of leadership and emphasis of doctrine, rather than major doctrinal disagreements. Tomlinson felt the movement had become a denomination. He has since aligned himself with the Fulness group.
- It is unlikely that the structure of the Bradford movement as it is now will be the final form, For example, there have been important developments within the three ministry teams which make up what I call the 'Bradford' movement and which jointly publish "Restoration" magazine. (Incidentally, the current editor is David Matthew, not Arthur Wallis), At an inter team conference in April 1985 it was agreed that the three teams should not meet again for a couple of years. Instead bonds were to be strengthened on an individual basis with other apostolic teams in England. A decision could then be taken later to convene conferences on a wider basis. Bryn Jones thus released fellow apostles Tony Morton and Terry Virgo to a wider and more independent ministry. (Virgo heads the Brighton based south coast area, and Morton the south west), An indication of what this may lead to is that Tony Morton and Gerald Coates have shared a public platform together. Virgo and Morton are much more inclined to work alongside the denominational churches than Jones' radical group.

Clearly therefore the name I have given to this group may become a misnomer, Bradford is the base of Bryn and Keri Jones. If the two southern ministry teams are to loosen their links with Bradford, other developments in this very fluid situation could yet take place.

According to Andrew Walker, the Bradford group had about 15-18,000 committed members and their children in 1985 and around 100 churches.

The “Fulness” Group

There have been numerous developments in this loose grouping which have left parts of the original article seriously out of date, In particular there have been major divisions between the significant leading figures I listed: Gerald Coates, John Noble, Maurice Smith, Nick Butterworth, John MacLaughlan, Graham Perrins, and George Tarleton,

Until 1979, “Fulness” magazine, edited by Graham Perrins, was the major focus for this group, But he and John MacLaughlan developed ideas about the primacy of the prophet over the apostle in the end-time kingdom. They decided to work together producing “Proclaim!” and no longer to relate to John Noble and Gerald Coates. By 1983 Perrins (in Cardiff) and MacLaughlan (Yeovil) had fallen out. Reports of Perrins going off the rails filtered out, though things are now said to have stabilised, As for MacLaughlan there have been defections from his churches and complaints of false prophecy and heavy handedness.

When “Fulness” ceased, Nick Butterworth tried unsuccessfully to edit a new journal in the early 1980s, In 1984 there were further serious splits. Maurice Smith and Nick Butterworth decided to pull their churches from under John Noble’s covering. They feel that the discipling doctrines are wrong. George Tarleton (who was recognised as an apostle by a prophecy of Bryn Jones in 1974) also decided to withdraw altogether from all Christian ministry.

The surviving rump of the original “Fulness” group is now centred on Gerald Coates, John Noble and David Tomlinson (the defector from Bryn Jones’ group). This group has tended to relate more with the rest of the neo-pentecostal movement, They differ from the more exclusive inward approach of the Bradford group, Links were developed with the Evangelical Alliance, Catholic charismatics and modern religious musical organisations such as “Spring Harvest” and “Banquet”.

Precisely how this group will evolve is uncertain. At present it is still growing despite its divisions. According to Andrew Walker, by 1985 it numbered around 8-10,000. They have influence over 120 odd churches, especially in the London area,

John L. Birkin

March/April 1986