

Book Reviews & Notes

Christian Perspectives on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, edited by Wesley H. Brown and Peter F. Penner (Pasadena, CA: WCIU Press, 2008, 238pp.)

—reviewed by Dean Gilliland



This volume reveals what takes place when followers of Isa-Yeshua face the painful issues that divide them and come together to find ways to build fellowship as Christians. From the 13th to 17th of November, 2006, Jewish and Arab spokespersons from twenty countries gathered in Prague (Czech Republic) for a Conference convened by the International Baptist Theological Seminary to discuss the topic,

“Christian Perspectives on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict.”

The Introduction and a recording of The Prague Declaration (which was the final work of the Conference) are followed by thirteen chapters. The eleven authors are made up by three from the Palestinian side, three from the Jewish side and five who write from the perspective of the West. The first chapter by co-editor Wesley H. Brown provides the historical background by laying out eight stages of the Palestinian crisis and the confrontation that has resulted. With helpful illustrative maps, it is valuable reading for understanding the political/cultural history of the conflict. The last chapter is a review of ten practices for just peacemaking which the author (Stassen) had laid out in a previous book. These practices have been useful for general situations of impending war but there is no attempt to apply them to the topic of this Conference in a contextual way.

This review cannot do justice to content or differences in writing styles. While uniformity is impossible, the overall objective is unmistakable. Some chapters show great care in promoting respect and in reflecting the spirit of reconciliation. Others state quite abruptly the presenter’s position but with little or no attempt to recognize the other side. Two aspects are consistent throughout: a recognition of the convoluted history of both peoples and the repeated use of quite familiar biblical passages. While many subsidiary biblical statements are dealt with (primarily regarding Israel), commentary on one question seems most frequent: “Can scriptural references to biblical Israel which occur with very different connotations be applied to Israel today?”

Differences in interpretation of Old Testament passages (by Palestinians, Messianic Jews, and more rigidly, by Christian Zionists) do seem almost unbridgeable. This led one writer to lament that biblical tensions are a second major barrier to fellowship, in addition to the conflict itself.

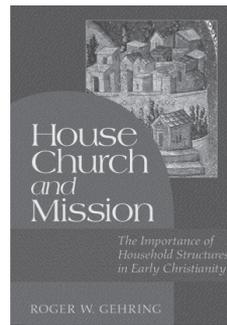
Certain terms come up frequently throughout the book and are used by both sides. Perhaps, listing some of them would help in summarizing content. Such words are: chosen, Christian Zionism, diversity, election, evangelical, Messianic, national election, eschatological, occupation, people-land, plain-literal hermeneutics, justice, replacement theology, restoration and rebirth. Knowing how these words are dealt with in this special context commends the book to all who truly want to understand.

Participants from Europe and the U.S.A. make interesting theological and biblical contributions such as the implications of national election as a theological paradigm; another, speaking from the German context, compares Christian Zionism with Restorationism, while a third sees the conflict between Samaritans and Jews as having corollaries to the Palestine dilemma. He also discusses the contextual models, C-4 through C-6, with some hope for relevance. However, at present, the breach between Israel and Palestine is such that it is hard to conceive of this as a useful approach.

Thankfully, the six areas addressed in the Prague Declaration were “unanimously confirmed” and is the “fruit” that was hoped for. Reading this book is at once a wrenching yet hopeful experience which you will be the better for having.

House Church and Mission: The Importance of Household Structures in Early Christianity, by Roger W. Gehring (Hendrickson Publishers, 2004, 408pp.)

—reviewed by Dave Datema



What are the odds that a translated dissertation could be compelling, intriguing and actually fun to read? This book beats the odds in a way many dissertations do not. Accepted in 1998 as the inaugural dissertation toward a ThD degree in New Testament Studies from the University of Tubingen, it was initially published in German in 2000, then printed in English in 2004. Roger Gehring,

a long-time member of Campus Crusade and now Adjunct Professor at George Fox Evangelical Seminary in Portland, Oregon, has produced a first-rate work of scholarship on a topic important to those involved in mission work. Thanks to a good use of discernment in deciding what to put in the extensive footnotes and what to include in the text, Gehring has made this scholarly work accessible to the non-scholar. One hindrance a non-scholar will encounter is that the many Greek words and phrases under discussion are never translated. Another possible hurdle for some will be the amount of space Gehring uses to explore the “historical reliability” of passages under consideration or the “undisputed Pauline letters.” Aside from these issues, the book is accessible to scholars and non-scholars alike.

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Gehring uses the introduction (chapter one) to give a history of research on the topic of house churches. The rest of the book is divided into time periods with a final chapter on the significance of house churches.

Chapter two is entitled "The Use of Houses Before Easter." Gehring argues for the following ideas in this section:

- While in Galilee, Jesus used the house of Peter as a center of operation for his ministry (Martha's home in Bethany may have been the Judean counterpart).
- The mission discourses in Luke 10 and Mark 6 indicate that Jesus taught his disciples to follow the same strategy: to set up fixed quarters in houses as a base for ministry. "The mission instructions indicate that the pre-Easter house mission, as Jesus and his disciples practiced it, was likely the embryonic form of house-to-house missional outreach and church development practiced after Easter" (58).
- "The picture of Jesus and his disciples as engaged exclusively in a 'shotgun' missional approach needs to be revised. Even before Easter he practiced 'regional mission' from a central operational base in one village or town out to the surrounding area" (61).

Chapter three is called "The Post-Easter Use of Houses in the Primitive Jerusalem Church," with the following major points:

- It seems likely that there were at least two house churches in the early days after Pentecost—the home of Mary (mother of John Mark) for Greek-speaking Jews and the home containing the upper room (plausibly the home of James) for Aramaic-speaking Jews. In time "a plurality of house churches existed alongside the local church as a whole in Jerusalem" (89).
- "the primitive church in Jerusalem came together in the temple in a large meeting as the *whole church*, and in private homes as individual church bodies in small groups as *house churches*" (83). Prayer, proclamation and instruction took place in the temple, whereas the house churches provided the occasion for the Lord's Supper, something that could not have been practiced publicly.
- Exactly how leadership in Jerusalem transferred from Peter and the Twelve to James and a council of elders remains elusive. The idea that elders were patterned after the synagogue is unlikely because elders in synagogues did not hold office but came to their position "on the basis of their seniority and social position in the community" (102). Instead of elders as an office, it seems rather that householders filled a leadership function since "it was inevitable that the patriarchal structures of the ancient household would partially

and in some respects largely determine the leadership structures of the church" (103). Apparently, "a tension existed between the circle of the Twelve and oikos structures regarding leadership structures in the Jerusalem church" (104). It also appears that the title "elder" eventually became a designation for office.

- "As early as 40/41 C.E. (Acts 10:1-48), then, we have a clear example of a house mission approach in the home of Cornelius in Caesarea" (108).
- Evidence also supports the idea of a plurality of house churches in Antioch.
- "The similarities of the Pauline mission with the house-to-house, itinerant, and regional missional approach of Jesus and his disciples can best be explained by assuming some kind of connecting link through which elements of the tradition of the mission discourse were transmitted from Jesus to Paul. The Hellenists, who, as we have seen, practiced such a house mission approach, seem the most likely to have been that link" (114).

Chapter four is called "The Use of Houses in Pauline Missional Outreach," and includes these major ideas:

- Acts and the Pauline letters indicate a plurality of house churches within cities, the combination of which constituted the whole church in that location.
- While trying to pin down the social class of early Christians is exceedingly difficult, it is nevertheless a fact that a significant number of people mentioned in Acts and Paul's letters were people of influence and wealth. Only the relatively wealthy could afford to own or rent a home large enough to serve as a house church. In fact, "it was typical of the Pauline missional approach in any given city to initially target individuals from higher social levels. In this way Paul was able to win homeowners, along with their entire households, for the gospel and to set up a base of operations in their house for local and regional mission" (187).
- The "house mission" approach was adapted by Paul into the "center mission" approach. "The term implies a series of young congregations networked with and equal to one another in the (capital) cities, that is, centers, which then became bases of operation for the Pauline mission" (181).
- "House churches opened the door for Paul to a whole network of relationships... Paul was automatically an insider" (188).
- "Jews and Gentiles, men and women, slaves and free alike came together in the house churches and sat at one table. Social tensions that became evident

(cf., e.g., 1 Cor 11) arose as a consequence of this principle, but they do not negate it. Pauline house churches were both a training ground *in* brotherly love for Christians and a showcase *for* brotherly love to non-Christians.” (190)

- Again, it is likely that the leadership structure of the house churches already existed in the form of the householder. So not only were existing structures (households) used, their leadership structures (house leaders) were also used. “For the congregation that met in a house, a leadership structure was already in place from the very beginning, built into the social infrastructure of the ancient oikos in advance” (201). Thus household leadership found its origin from within the household and was legitimated later by Paul (Ac.14:23).
- Such household leaders were later considered “overseers” or “bishops,” while the group of such leaders within a single city were “elders.”
- The prominence of women in the early church is not surprising since “in the ancient world religious matters within the household were the woman’s classic sphere of influence” (211).

Chapter five is entitled “The Continuing Influence of Oikos Structures” and contains these important points:

- Significant tension existed between the ancient oikos structures and the new spiritual communities housed in them. “In the church, women were to be valued just as highly as men, slaves as their masters, Gentiles as Jews. . . . The structure of the family in the oikos society of the ancient world was set in its ways, however, and it was not at all the intention of the church to destabilize that society. This would have happened, however, if the Christian movement had radically changed the oikos structures” (237). “The structure, hierarchical as it was, was left unaltered, apart from the introduction of the new principle, ‘as is fitting in the Lord’—which was to be more revolutionary in its effect than was generally foreseen in the first Christian century” (237, quoting F. F. Bruce in footnote). “Early Christians had no intention of instigating a social revolution” (250).
- The Pastoral Epistles indicate a change in leadership structures as Paul felt the need to create structures to stabilize the churches for the long term. It appears most likely that the role of the overseers/bishops, originally designating leadership of one house church, was expanded to the idea of leadership of all the house churches in one city, represented by a council of elders. One of the elders in a city-church, already a

“bishop” of his own house church, became the bishop for the entire group of city-churches as well.

The sixth and final chapter is called “The Ecclesiological and Missional Function and Significance of House Churches” and highlights the author’s conclusions.

- Readers are cautioned to avoid a quick application from the early church setting to modern times. “The ancient oikos as extended family including slaves, hired laborers, and clients, with its fundamental significance for society and economy, does not exist as such anymore, at least not in the Western world. Our term for family is no longer synonymous with that of the ancient household” (301).
- The weaknesses of the house church model are the quantitative limitation, tendency toward divisiveness, unhealthy dependence on the leading personality and an elitist attitude.
- The strengths of the house church model are its suitability in places of persecution, financial attractiveness of not buying property, the attractiveness to the unchurched and the advantage of personal, accountable relationships.
- Interestingly, “house church models that are most vital on a long-term basis and thus the most convincing are the ones that are well integrated into such suprastructures, that is, under the authority and safeguard of a local church or major denomination” (305).

As is the case with all issues related to biblical exegesis, understanding what happened in the original setting is always easier than applying it to the present one. Mission strategists will have much to ponder in this book, but those interested specifically in frontier missions will find the following issues of primary importance:

1. The relationship between oikos structures (including leadership) and insider movement thinking. Much of what Gehring says lends credence to the insider idea. In fact, it could be reasonably argued that this was in essence the approach in the NT, to use existing structures and leadership patterns in establishing the church. Here is biblical precedent for insider thinking.
2. The relationship between the ethnic and social diversity of neighboring Christians and the best way forward in places like India. On the one hand, Gehring argues that believers of diverse ethnic and social background did in fact worship together, crossing significant boundaries to do so (why else would Paul have de-emphasized such distinctions, e.g. Gal.3:28?). On the other hand, it is also obvious that an attempt to radically alter the hierarchical and discriminating social structure was not pursued by Jesus or Paul. Where does this leave us with regard to

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responding to caste in India, for example? It may be that God expects more social action from Christians today who wield much more power and influence than did the early church, but this argument is not biblically explicit. What is explicit is that in Colossians 3:11 ethnic and social distinctions are seemingly wiped out, only to reappear seven verses later in the household code where Paul gives instructions to believers representing these same distinctions (3:18-4:1)! Perhaps we can at least be wise to recognize ethnic and social distinctions in our strategizing without discarding the longer-term ideal of mixed worship. After all, according to Gehring, it was just this reality that gave the early church its unique and distinctive punch. It is one thing for individuals or groups to come to faith in Christ and yet quite another for them to cross ethnic or social boundaries as a result.

3. The relationship between biblical history and mission strategy. Since Paul deviated from (or at least significantly developed) Jesus' house mission approach to a more center mission approach, we would be wise to recognize that the Bible doesn't appear to lay down a universal mission strategy. Instead, it would appear that context goes a long way in determining strategy. The diversity of context does not easily fit into our models.

Reading this book will be time well spent. **IJFM**

In Others' Words

Editor's Note: In this new department, we point you to resources outside of the IJFM that we hope you'll find helpful: other journals, print resources, DVDs, web sites, blogs, YouTube videos, etc. We welcome suggestions, but cannot promise that we will publish each one we receive. Standard disclaimers on content apply.

Some favorites from IJFM author Leith Gray

Incredible Online Bible

www.biblos.com has Bible texts, images, parallel Bible and Greek interlinear layouts, story lists, maps... this site seems to have it all. Most is public domain or sharable.

Theological Papers on Muslim-Christian Issues

www.yale.edu/faith/rc/rc-rp.htm

Joseph Cumming has presented papers on "Did Jesus die on the Cross?" "The Meaning of the Expression 'Son of God'" and other issues to gatherings of major Muslim leaders with very positive reactions.

Interview with Carl Medearis

www.prairie.edu/servant/InnerviewCarl%20Medearis.pdf

Excellent interview from an online journal of Prairie Bible Institute.

Don't Miss These

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"Radically transforming the conversation."

www.globalchristianity.org

See sample pages of the *Atlas of Global Christianity*.

www.worldchristiandatabase.org

Extensive data on 9,000 Christian denominations, 13,000 ethnolinguistic peoples, as well as data on 5,000 cities, 3,000 provinces and 238 countries.

International Orality Network

www.ion2008.ning.com

Lots of resources, groups, blogs, videos, forums, etc.

IJFM consulting editor in Popular Mechanics?

www.popularmechanics.com/science/air_space/4316243.html?page=1

Other sites worth checking out:

www.missioninfobank.org

www.4kworldmap.com

www.peoplegroups.org

www.worldmap.org

www.joshuaproject.net

www.ethnologue.org