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House church and mission: the importance of household structures in early Christianity

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brought face to face as to why “reasons of state” necessitated his death. I have some quarrel with Horsley’s interpretation of particular texts, and I find his confidence in the historicity of the Markan redactor greater than my own. When I work with the text in search of historical Jesus material I sense that I push harder than Dr. Horsley on separating tradition and redaction. Yet having said that, I remain a solid booster of his work. John Dominic Crossan, William Herzog and Richard Horsley feed me as a trinity of New Testament scholars who bring Jesus of Nazareth to life. Most recently it is Richard A. Horsley whose 1993 *The Liberation of Christmas* led me spiritually through this year’s Christmas season. Simultaneously his *Jesus and Empire* reminds me daily that Christ and not Caesar is Lord and that when one “renders to God what belongs to God” that leaves next to nothing for Caesar. The God of Jesus described by the American Richard Horsley calls into question the so-called “Christian” imperialism of George W. Bush and Company. The Jesus we encounter in this book does honour not only to Richard Horsley its author but also to the social gospel namesake of the lectures he delivered.

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**House Church and Mission:
 The Importance of Household Structures in Early Christianity**

Roger W. Gehring

Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004

408 pages, \$34.29 Softcover

Most published dissertations have a tendency to be a heavy and burdensome read, however scholarly they might be. Thankfully Gehring’s tome on the New Testament house churches stands out as an exception. Yes, it reads like a dissertation, yet at the same time, it remains compelling, even inspiring in places. To be sure, the passion the topic holds for me may be a factor in this judgement; nonetheless, any who have both a scholarly and pastoral interest in this theme will

find treasures aplenty in this book. Gehring gives much attention to New Testament scholars who have dealt with the topic since the pioneering days of the historical critical school of Biblical studies, especially in Germany. He covers the ground thoroughly and fairly with his predecessors, and his own scholarship of materials in the New Testament remains thorough and for the most part convincing. Especially, I applaud his painstaking work in examining architectural space and its impact on size and nature of the house communities.

At the same time I offer some criticism in the context of healthy academic dialogue. Understandably he derives much material from the Book of Acts, as well he should, since this book represents an important contribution in terms of data for early Christianity. However, I find Gehring far too uncritical of Acts in terms of the debate for its historicity. He lies in that camp of scholars who give significantly more historical credibility to this work than I am prepared to acknowledge. Also I find he gives less attention to social and class stress within the house communities than I believe to be warranted. In this respect I find Robert Jewett's work more convincing. However, my major critique emerges from his dealings around gender issues in the Jesus communities. I am much more inclined to accept Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's view that Paul experienced more gender-equal house communities which evolved into the standard Roman model of a patriarchal household (Colossians and Ephesians) under both internal and external pressures emerging a generation after Paul. The author's excursus on women leaders seems to me to be a rather timid move toward giving more attention to gender issues, a move for which we owe immeasurable gratitude to feminist scholars. I find his ventures into this area too moderate for my taste. They seem to reflect too great a trust in Paul's veracity and less of a willingness to tease out information that just might make Paul look just a bit more human and conflicted.

These above points represent more a call for continuing debate and dialogue rather than an attempt to degrade a most worthy book. Indeed, I recommend Gehring's *House Church and Mission* highly. At the same time my appeal is to let the debate continue.

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