

# HISTORY OF A CHURCH FROM CHRIS JOHNSON'S PERSPECTIVE, PART I

## 1

Our first real meeting was on April 12, 2003. We gathered at the home of John and Julie Monahan in North Tampa, Florida from 6 until 9 o'clock. It was a Saturday evening, and the first all of us had shared together. Along with our small family came the Crawfords: Tom, Cheryl, Daniel, Noah, and Tom's mother, Susan. We arrived at roughly the same time, and I remember pulling into the suburban neighborhood and seeing the Monahan's children, Lauren, Tommy, and Amy, in the front yard. There was excitement and anticipation of the relationships that might come from our meeting.

We had decided to gather and discuss beginning a new work in the Lord, a biblical church that would pursue certain ideals that we all knew were lacking from mainstream churches in our area. We had been in touch with the Monahan's, and several other interested families, through a church directory on Vision Forum's website. After trying to schedule a time when all the families could gather together, we finally decided to hold an initial meeting with just the three families, and go from there. The Monahan's were new to the homechurch model; Julie had read two books (*How to Meet in Homes*<sup>1</sup> and *Toward a Housechurch Theology*<sup>2</sup>) that had sparked her interest, and so she had tracked us down. The Crawfords were at the time attending an inter-city, southern Baptist church that they were beginning to grow frustrated with. Our family had not been fellowshiping anywhere on a consistent basis. We had tried to have a homegroup with the Crawfords and some other friends 6 months prior, but there was no biblical foundation for what we were doing.

The Monahan's had moved to Tampa from Connecticut six months earlier. John (John) had been given the chance to relocate by his company, and he felt that the Lord had called him south. Six months later, he still seemed uneasy about his decision, but was trying not to regret it. He had left behind his parents, with whom they had strong ties. They had lived on a great piece of property with lots of trees and nature all around. Now they were living in a cookie cutter home in a well-to-do suburb with not a tree in site.

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<sup>1</sup> Gene Edwards, *How to Meet in Homes*, (Seed Sowers, 1999)

They lived in a very nice home however, that was well suited to hosting church meetings. A back porch had been enclosed into a sunroom and was used during the day as a homeschool area. We were excited to have a family that could actually host meetings, since we were still living in a small townhouse at the time. John was very soft spoken and had a very compassionate spirit. Like so many other families, it was clear that Julie probably had more influence on the family than John, but she had a desire for him to be a leader. It was difficult to tell how much interest John actually had in homechurch, but Julie could not stop talking about it. The Monahan's children were very nice, albeit a little shy. Lauren was around 12 years old and desperately wanted to be treated as a young woman, but she also had a rebellious streak in her. John spoke with the men about his concern for her disinterest in the things of God. Their son Tommy was very shy, and their youngest daughter Amy was a sweet little girl who craved acceptance.

During that first meeting we all shared our experience in the church and how we had come to our present beliefs. We discussed books we had read that had helped influence our ideas, as well as circumstances that gave us a better understanding of flaws in the church. Tom and I shared our vision for what the church might look like, how it would be lead, what would happen in the meetings, and how the children might be involved. I also talked of the commitment that would be necessary if we were to go forward. I explained to the Monahan's how difficult it could be to fellowship in such a vulnerable way and presented to them the difficulties and hardships that would come along with trying to do things in a biblical fashion with nowhere to hide. The Monahan's indicated that they were indeed prepared to stay the course along with us. We shared coffee and desserts as the children played in the sunroom. It was a time of peace and joyful expectation that no one could have expected. We prayed as a group and asked for the Lord's blessing and direction to ascertain what we should do. We agreed to meet again in a few weeks so that the other families would be able to join us. It was decided that we should take things slowly and lay a good foundation so that our efforts would last. The consensus of the meeting was that we all should labor together and begin laying a foundation for a new church.

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<sup>2</sup> Steve Atkerson, *Toward a Housechurch Theology*, (New Testament Reformation Foundation, 1996)

I remember being excited that the Lord was at work in our midst and that He was answering our prayers. There was an emotional attachment that had taken place as a result of our meeting, and everyone was happy to know that there were others out there who had similar feelings.

The next meeting that took place was two weeks later on April 28. It was a Sunday afternoon and we had agreed to meet at Lettuce Lake Park. It was a time to share our plans in how we might begin something none of us had ever had experience in doing. The Monahans, Crawfords, and Johnsons were once again present, along with a couple we had recently befriended; Peter and Christian Miller. The other families that had initially shown interest in working with us let us know that they had moved on to other fellowships. We all sat together on the grass and talked about what had been going on in our lives during the past two weeks. Julie shared a passage from *The Open Church*<sup>3</sup> and we all discussed problems and ideas from books and tapes that we had been reading or listening to. Peter shared that he had grown up in a homechurch that his family had attended in Illinois. We were all surprised and excited and asked him to share his thoughts and memories. The children played while we talked, and although Lauren, their oldest, was present during the meeting, she did not share or show much interest. After talking for awhile, we decided to start cooking some food on the grill. While we were eating, one of the men that whom we had hoped would help us begin the work, Jay, arrived with his son, John. He only stayed briefly enough to discuss homeschooling with the Monahan's and then had to leave. Jay informed us that he was going to start attending a small, independent bible church with his family. It seemed a setback, as we thought that surely Jay would be a candidate for an elder, which we had been desperately praying for.

Coming from our background of a leaderless, charismatic homechurch, Lindsay and I had come to the realization of the biblical necessity of elders in the church. Our major question in beginning a work was whether or not we should start without elders in place. We felt confident that there was a biblical precedent of churches beginning without elders and later having them appointed or recognized (Titus). We had also heard teaching that it was all right to meet under provisional leadership until men had risen up. To be fair, we had also heard teaching that strongly warned against meeting without

elders, but we felt that the Lord had given us a call. So we decided to petition the Lord to give us biblically qualified men with a desire to serve as elders. Jay seemed like a natural choice, but the Lord had other plans for his family.

Our picnic at the park lasted three hours. It was a time of fellowship and offered a chance to get to know one another. It was a somewhat frightening proposition to commit to such a hard work with people we hardly knew. We decided to convene once again the following Saturday at the Monahan's. We would gather to continue to seek the Lord's guidance, and not to start doing anything yet. Afterwards Lindsay and I went out for coffee with Peter and Christina. We shared with them our new convictions on childbearing and talked with them about the joys and trials of marriage. We felt a kinship with them, and it was a joy to have a brother in the Lord around who spoke from the scriptures and not from his feelings.

On Saturday, May 3, 2003 we met at the Monahan's house. We all arrived around 6:00pm. This time Tom's bother Harry Dodd and his family joined us. His wife Angie, and his two sons David (11) and Josiah (8 mos) came with him. We started the meeting by just sitting around and fellowshiping with one another. After awhile we all gathered together and I presented a small teaching on the Love Feast and the Lord's Supper. I explained my thoughts on the importance of eating a meal together and sharing the Lord's Supper on a weekly basis. I had Lauren and David read scriptures to try and involve them in the meeting. After the teaching we shared a meal together. The women had all brought food to share in a potluck dinner. Lindsay and I had learned from our previous homechurch that expecting a host family to provide food was too much of a burden, and that all the families should help out. After the meal we tried something that I had seen other churches do that I thought would be very beneficial for us. The men and women separated into what we termed "brothers and sisters meetings." We thought that it was important for the men to be able to share their struggles and experiences as a group so as to encourage each other and provide accountability. It would be a chance to challenge and support one another in personal devotion as well as family worship. I also saw it as a chance to show our sons how to be men. I wanted the young boys to be involved and feel as if they had a stake in the fellowship. The sisters meeting provided the women the same opportunities, and gave them a chance to practice the things set

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<sup>3</sup> James H. Rutz, *The Open Church*, (Seed Sowers, 1992)

forth in Titus chapter 2. During the meeting Harry shared some troubles he was going through with David and we encouraged him to be a father and stand up and take responsibility for his son. We laid hands on and prayed over Harry. He was very encouraged and appreciated our concern for his family. Despite any spoken or unspoken expectations, the boys played off in the yard and did not participate in the meeting.

Harry had met with us a few times, a year or so back when we had been meeting with the Crawfords and friends on Saturday evenings. Although I thought of it as church at the time, it was really more of a time for discussion and fellowship. Harry had a real zeal for the Lord, but not much stability. He had been saved for many years and had always drifted in and out of sin as well as the church. He was the kind of guy that was a great Christian, as long as someone was around to keep him accountable to being one. His wife was a new believer, with hardly any knowledge of the scriptures or the church. Tom's mother had been instrumental in preaching the word to her. Tom and I tried to consistently encourage Harry to be a part of a body of believers and to be faithful to his family and his Lord. When he had met with us before, he was living in Orlando, but he had moved to Tampa and we felt confident that he would be a good fit in our body.

After the meeting it felt like things were starting to come together and look more like it was time to start laying our foundation. We had begun the teaching of the word, as well as partaking of a meal together. We needed to keep seeking for and praying for biblically qualified men who would be able to provide a covering and authority for us to be a real church. Lindsay and I were very careful not to say that our group was a church. We always stated that we were laying a foundation of a church, as we were not convinced that it could truly be a church without leadership. We saw the meetings as a time to formulate a vision and pray for its implementation. The families decided to take a giant step forward by beginning to meet on Sunday mornings. It was decided that this would show a commitment to the founding of the church, especially for families like the Crawfords, who had not yet left their previous church. We knew that we were as a spring chicken, but we were enjoying fellowship and peace in the Lord. It's easier to rest in the pasture when you realize that it's down in the valley.

The early meetings were a time to get to know each other, to bask in the joy of true fellowship. All of us were at first drawn by a common belief and ideal that there was something desperately wrong with the modern church. All of us had our own ideas as to what exactly was wrong, but we all agreed that there was no true bond of love and fellowship among the saints in most modern evangelical churches. We also acknowledged that the modern church was hostile to families, and that we wanted to bring families together, not split them apart. We did not know each other's doctrinal positions on what we considered secondary issues, we agreed to fellowship on the basis of Christ and our commonalities.

Our next meeting was on May 18, 2003, once again at the Monahan's. The Monahans, Crawfords, Johnsons and the Millers were all present at the Sunday morning meeting. Lindsay's sister Libby also visited with her friend Dave. I presented a teaching on elders in which I went over the basic biblical qualifications and reasons for having elders. It was the first of what I foresaw as a two-part series that would establish our doctrines for appointing elders in our church. There was not a whole lot of interaction, but the Monahan's did ask for clarification on a few points during the teaching. I tried to explain the difference between the world's definition of "Leadership" and "Authority" and the bible's definition of the same two words. After the teaching Peter shared a song and read an article to the group.

We had met Peter through some friends in a ministry called "Jesus Loves You" that traveled around the country ministering to alternative youth. Peter was a very tender hearted man, and had been married to Christina for a little less than a year. They lived in Plant City where Peter worked at a plant nursery. Peter came from a family that had the vagabond spirit in their bones. He found it very hard to be settled in one place. Peter and Christina were both great musicians and singers that loved to worship the Lord. Peter had a great understanding of scriptures, but could be unstable if he was around the wrong people. Peter had been an answer to my prayer that the Lord would send me Christian men as friends. I enjoyed Peter's fellowship, and he brought out compassion in all those around him. It was a long drive for Peter and Christina to come fellowship with

us, but they brought such a pleasant spirit to the meetings, that I prayed earnestly that they would join us in our work.

The brothers meeting went well, with the men sharing a refreshing time of encouragement and challenge. Tom and I were beginning to experience the joys and challenge of family worship, and were challenging John to be a leader in his family. He explained the difficulties he was experiencing in finding the time to have personal devotion, time with his wife, and time with his children. I learned after the meeting, in which I taught on biblical qualifications concerning divorced men being elders, that John was himself divorced from his previous wife. I had taught that I did not believe at that time that divorced men were elder qualified. The issue never came up publicly between the men, but John would not have said anything if he had been offended.

The next meeting was on June 1, 2003 and was held at my parent's house in Odessa, Florida. The families gathered at 1:00 in the afternoon. The Monahans, Crawfords, Johnsons and Millers were all once again present. Jesse, a brother who was staying at our house for a few weeks was also a part of the meeting. A new family, the Smiths had contacted Tom about coming to see what we were doing. Wilson and Leah Smith arrived with their three girls, Katie, Ruth, and Mary and joined right in. The Smiths were very open in sharing about their family, and Wilson expounded at length during our discussions. He displayed a strong grasp of scripture, and was proud to demonstrate his memorization of many passages. The Smiths impressed upon us the intense experience that it was to place so much trust in a group of people they had never met by showing up at the door of our meeting. They were encouraged by the fellowship offered to them on the basis of faith. I was supposed to continue my teaching on elders by sharing the second part of my study, but had found the breadth of the study overwhelming, and did not have it finished. Wilson wanted to know more about our beliefs on elders and what I had been teaching. The Smiths had come from a church where elders had abused their office, and the Smiths were wearied by the word. I explained to them my teaching, and the meaning of servant leadership. I tried to communicate the biblical necessity of elder leadership. We then shared in the Lord's Supper and had a fellowship meal together.

After the meal we broke up into brothers and sisters meetings. The men's meeting was very balanced, with all the men participating and sharing. We talked about the effort that

was needed from all men in order to make a church like our successful. I shared about how hesitant I was to do or say too much for fear of trying to take things over. Wilson made an excellent analogy explaining our position. He pointed at the piano in my parents living and room and explained that if we wanted to pick it up, it was necessary for all of us to put our hands on the piano. If everyone was afraid to place their hands on it, nothing would happen. On the other hand, if only one person was pushing it, the piano could not be picked up. Therefore it was necessary for all of us to place our hands on the piano, in order for it to be moved in the right direction. Wilson added a new dimension to the men's meeting and provided some healthy stretching to us all. During the meeting, Peter shared that he was considering moving his family to Missouri to pursue a work opportunity. We all encouraged him to seek the Lord and confer with his wife on the decision. He communicated that Christina was not thrilled about moving, but that he thought it was the right time to move on. We also discussed with Wilson the prospect of his family laboring with us to lay a strong foundation. He seemed to understand the hard work that would come along with such a commitment, but said that he was definitely interested in doing so.

When the Smiths joined us, they had been going through a major trial with their previous church during the last year. They had been a part of a local Church of Christ congregation near their home in Lutz. Wilson had been in what he described as the right wing, pharisaical branch of the Church of Christ his entire life. The Lord had been slowly opening his eyes to major problems within the church. When Wilson confronted the elders of the church about these problems, they labeled him a troublemaker and a heretic. A nasty breach followed with harsh name-calling and the like. The Smiths had been out of the church for almost a year when they contacted us. Wilson was re-learning many things, and was open to teaching from the Word. He had been taught many great things of God through the Church of Christ, but had admittedly also picked up lots of false teaching as well. The Smith's had been deeply hurt and were still working through anger and bitterness as a result of their trials. We were excited to have such a great family with a man that had such a broad grasp of scripture. It seemed like the Lord was answering our prayers by sending a potentially elder qualified man.

We ended the meeting overjoyed at the prospect of another family joining us. We had experienced a great time of worship and fellowship and eagerly anticipated another gathering.

### 3

We met the following week at the Monahan's house at 11:00. The Monahans, Crawfords, Johnsons and Smiths were all present. With 18 people, the meetings began to feel more like a gathering of the church. It was evident that the Lord was beginning to bless our efforts. We started the meeting by fellowshiping together for a good hour. Groups of people were scattered in different rooms sharing what the Lord had been doing in their lives during the week. It was apparent that the assembly of believers was beginning to be bound to one another in fellowship and love. We shared a meal together after our time of sharing and then broke into brothers and sisters meetings. During the men's meeting we shared how our week had been. Tom and I shared our trials in disciplining our children and we all discussed family worship. Tommy and Daniel were present in the meeting and we attempted to involve them by asking them questions about their week. I brought up that it would be necessary for us all to start discussing what our doctrinal beliefs were. After some prodding by Wilson, Tom decided that we should start with what we all believed about speaking in tongues. After discussion and looking at scripture, we were all surprised that there was agreement among all of us. We were amazed at how easy the discussion had gone, and prayed that all subsequent issues would go just as easily. I expressed my concern that we continue to consistently wrestle with doctrinal issues together in order to be in one accord.

After the brothers meeting we joined back together with the ladies and shared our conclusions from our discussion. The Monahan children put on a puppet play and read from scripture. It was a blessing to see the children being involved in a practical way. Up to that point there had not been any real interaction with the children in the meeting. None of us knew exactly how the children should be involved, but we did know they

were supposed to be present. The play was a great idea, and gave us hope for more involvement and interest on the part of our children.

Over the next month and a half we met every Sunday morning at 11:00. We had meetings at the Monahan's, Crawford's and Smith's house. The men had their first separate brothers meeting during that time at our house. Since I could not host Sunday meetings due to the size of our house, the monthly men and women's meetings were always held at our home. The men's meeting was to serve as a precursor to elder's meetings, in which the men would discuss problems that had come up and decide the doctrines of the church. During that first meeting we discussed the aspects that we felt were integral to our meetings, the Lord's supper, public reading of the word, teaching, and singing. As a result, we began to settle into an order of doing things during the Sunday meetings. Usually we would have a sharing time, eat our meal, have a time of teaching, and then we would break up into our brothers and sisters meetings and afterward partake of the Lord's Supper. We would also try and add some worship somewhere in the mix, but were not consistent about it. Wilson and I were the most outspoken in the men's meetings, with Tom next, and John being the quietest. Wilson would speak in long drawn-out monologues in order to prove his point, and would often cut-off the quieter men. Tom would give his thoughts only when prodded, but he always gave a balanced position. John always kept everyone on a loving level and provided a much-needed contrasting view quite often.

In July we lost our first family. The Miller's decided that they were going to move to Missouri. The men all counseled Peter that they did not feel the Lord calling him there and that he should reconsider. Peter felt confident that he should be moving on, so we reluctantly blessed them and told them to keep in touch. It was very hard to see such a new and dear friend move away at what seemed to be the beginning of a great friendship.

On one Sunday in early August we were scheduled to meet at the Crawfords house. When we arrived, Tom told us that John had called and said that his family would not be coming. There was some confusion as to whether that meant they weren't coming on that particular Sunday, or ever again. After the meeting I called John and asked him what was going on. He told me that they shouldn't have left their church in the first place.

Since they were never a part of a church in Tampa, I wasn't sure if he meant their old hometown church. I reminded him that he had made a commitment to our fellowship, but he told me that he thought it was the right decision for his family. Tom and Wilson also called him that week to find out what was going on. Tom asked if there was a problem with our church or if they had been offended, but John said no. Wilson tried to convince John that he needed to stay with us, but to no avail. We were all very puzzled by the situation and could not understand what had happened. The Monahan's had been a founding family, one of the primary reasons we felt that we could go ahead with the work, and now they were suddenly gone. There was a corporate grieving that took place during the next meeting in which we all mourned the loss of a family. It was as if an arm had been severed from our body. Since there was no explanation for the departure, we were only left to our own weak conjectures. The best explanation that we could formulate was that it was just too much work for John, a man not used to leading his family in the way that we were calling for. It was a dark and sad time that made us question our words and actions in order to see if we were the problem.

#### 4

There is a time for everything, including a time to mourn. The Lord showed us that our season for mourning was to be a short one. The very next week after our grieving Sunday, a new family arrived to see what we were doing. Wilson and Leah had met a family at the park some six months earlier. Ralph and Martha Cook had met the Smith's there, and talked with them at length about church and family, and had consequently been a mutual timely blessing to each others lives. They had kept in touch as the Smith's began meeting with us, and Wilson had persuaded Ralph and his family to come give our church a shot. In mid-August the Cooks showed up for a Sunday meeting at the Crawford's house with their three children, Elizabeth, Brad and Carol. They shared how they had come to meet the Smiths and what their current church situation was. They were currently fellowshiping at a small local Baptist church in Apollo Beach that Ralph had been attending most of his life. Ralph shared that he had been an associate pastor at a church and had always thought he would pastor a church. The Lord had been revealing to him different plans as well as problems with their current church. Like the Monahans and Smiths, the Cooks were a homeschooling family. They were beginning to realize that their children should be present with them in the meeting of the church.

Elizabeth was coming to the age where she would be expected to attend youth group, and her parents did not want her to be a part of that culture. All of these things made them question whether or not they should continue to fellowship at the Baptist church. Ralph had gone to bible school, and had a strong grasp of the scripture as a result. The first week the Cooks attended, they participated in a limited fashion, observing what we were doing. The next week they came to the Smith's for the meeting. They seemed more comfortable and their true personalities began to come out. Ralph was very interested in how we were doing things and questioned me about everything. He could come across as very offensive, especially since I had not had to defend what we were doing in a long time. It was a good time of going through the scriptures and giving a biblical defense for the way we were holding our meetings. Although the Cooks were still attending their regular church, there seemed to be a promise of the Lord that He would bless us with a family to replace the seat vacated by the Monahan's.

The Cooks informed us that they had told their local pastor that they were going to be away from the Baptist church for the month of September in order to find out if the Lord wanted them to be with us. So for the whole month they continued to fellowship with us. Ralph attended a brothers meeting during that time and participated fully, although he considered himself an outsider giving advice. The women adapted to Martha instantly, and their children were a joy to the fellowship. Elizabeth their oldest, was especially a blessing to the body through her sweet presence. She often helped by holding Lily and serving others.

Ralph brought even more stretching to our close knit family. How would we respond to another man with strong convictions and leadership aspirations? Tom and I hoped that the Lord was granting us men who might one day be elders in the body, even though Wilson and Ralph were not particularly convinced we needed any. We continued to have infrequent brothers meetings to try and establish doctrines and practices of the church. We mostly dealt with issues revolving around the children being in the meeting. Things like what kinds of toys were not allowed, who should sit where, and how much of an attention span children really possess. We decided that whomever's house the meeting was being held at was responsible for keeping the meeting moving along. An agreement was made to try and break things up into half-hour segments in order to keep the children involved; a half-hour of sharing, a half-hour of teaching, a half-hour of singing,

and so on. I still encouraged the men to each bring a teaching, but we gradually adapted a format where the “host” would direct the teaching however he saw fit. We also decided, with the input of our wives, to go to a two-week format, where the host family would hold the meetings for two weeks in a row before switching. Ralph contributed a practical argument to our discussions, albeit usually of a traditional slant that, for the most part, we were trying to get away from. He suggested adopting a name for the fellowship, or advertising in the paper, something to get more people to come. He was always concerned with very practical issues and from the very beginning wanted to know what our plan was when we got too large as a group.

At the end of September the Cooks informed us that they had asked their church for permission to leave and join our fellowship. We were all excited and thanked the Lord for His kindness to us. Over the past two months, Tom had steadily become more outspoken and offered up words of leadership when necessary. In a fellowship like ours was, it is impossible to be a functioning member without offering up a contribution, and Tom was learning to take a stand when needed. On the topic of contributions, the four men also discussed just what to do with our tithe money. Tom and I had been against incorporating into a 501©3 organization from the very beginning, and therefore we needed to figure out what to do with our money. Wilson felt like there was biblical precedent for the families to collect their money and contribute to the needs of others as they came up. Up until that point there really had not been any needs among us. But not long after we made that decision a need presented itself. Ever since our second meeting, Angie Dodd, along with her son Noah, and David, infrequently fellowshiped with us. We were unsure how exactly to approach the situation, since we all felt that Harry should be there as the leader of his family. Sometime in October the Dodds moved into a new house and were in need of help cleaning up and were short on household supplies. We all gathered some money and sent the women to Sam’s Club to pick up supplies for the family. The men drove to Harry’s house where we planned on helping him clean up and move in. There turned out to be not much to do, so we helped with what we could and waited for the women to show up.

It was a great feeling to be able to bless a family as a church, and the Dodds responded by hosting a meeting a few weeks later. The meeting turned out to be a little scattered, with Harry spending most of the time outside with some visiting friends. It turned out to

be one of the last times we would see Harry or his family. David continued to come sporadically with his grandmother, Susan Crawford, but Angie remained home while Harry worked on Sunday's. For a few months the men continued to discuss Harry's absence and the effect he was having on his family, but no action was taken and no pressure was applied. All we could do was lament his abdication of responsibility.

A separate brothers meeting was held in late October/early November, the men finally drafted a statement of their core beliefs. Each man came with a list of things he thought should be included as our core beliefs. Ralph was the most prepared and put forth a 7-point list of items that was a quick and easy summary of the foundational beliefs of the Christian faith. Even in talking about core beliefs it was becoming obvious that we all came from extremely different backgrounds and held to differing doctrinal beliefs. One example of this was the issue of baptism. Coming from the Church of Christ, Wilson held the view that baptism was necessary for salvation. He was willing to concede the point for the sake of unity, but his hesitancy had made an impact. The issue of baptism would prove to be a volatile one, with all of us differing as to the importance and timing of an individual's baptism. For the most part, after 6 months, it was nice to finally have some beliefs down on paper that we could point people to if they had questions.

## 5

As a fellowship with such promise of community, it was hard to get together apart from our Sunday meetings. The Smiths and Cooks lived almost an hour away from each other, with the Crawfords and ourselves scattered in the middle. In January 2004, the women began to have a monthly time of study and fellowship in which they went through a book called "The Excellent Wife."<sup>4</sup> It seemed to be a great time of communion between the ladies and certainly helped to draw them all closer together. They were able to learn things about each other that could not be learned from the Sunday meetings. The men too held their monthly brothers meetings as often as possible, with varying frequency. Families shared weeknight meals together very rarely, with the heads of households valuing their personal time with their families. The church had celebrated a fourth of July party back when the Monahan's were around, and had also gone to the park during the

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<sup>4</sup> Martha Peace, *The Excellent Wife*, (Christian Book Distributors, 1996)

fall for a cookout. During the holiday season, the fellowship gathered for a Christmas Eve celebration at my parent's house. We met in the late evening and fellowshiped around the house. We then partook of a holiday feast, with all the children running around, while the adults sipped warm tea and ate dessert. Afterwards we sang Christmas Carols, and Dave Johnson read "Twas the Night Before Christmas" with the children listening anxiously. It was great to share such a special time with brothers and sisters that were growing ever closer to each other. Apart from special seasonal celebrations, the families never really did anything else together. The women would call each other during the week at times to discuss various issues. Lindsay and Cheryl were best friends before the fellowship, so that was nothing new. Leah and Martha spoke often to one another and all the ladies participated in an email discussion list that kept them somewhat connected. The men did not have any correspondence during the week other than necessary emails or phone calls to confirm locations and times of meetings.

During the Thanksgiving holiday, the Smith's traveled up to Wilson's parent's house in Ohio. When they returned, there seemed to be something different. After a few weeks, Wilson confessed that his family had been praying about moving up to Ohio. Wilson's mother had been diagnosed with a disease, and Wilson wanted to be near his family to help. Near the first of the year, he and Leah began searching for a job for him to relocate to. The other men seemed to silently question Wilson's desire, and even hinted at feeling deserted. No one ever openly challenged him as to the commitment he had made, we all trusted his decision-making abilities.

Our weekly meetings continued along at somewhat of a status quo. We tried to suggest topics of study that would last until our next leadership meeting, but there was no real structure to our teaching. The worship was infrequent at best. Each family had a 3-ring binder in which they were supposed to keep songs that we printed out for worship. Tom and I were usually the only ones to plan singing for when it was at our house. Ralph's wife Martha played the piano, and so we encouraged Ralph's family to lead us in song, but Martha was uncomfortable playing in front of others. We usually managed to have communion, but sometimes it was as we were walking out the door. Ralph expressed concern over the lack of reverence concerning the Lord's Supper in these situations, so we started partaking of the Lord's Table before we had our meal to ensure that we had the proper time. At first we passed around a cup and dipped the bread in it. Ralph

introduced a new concept at a meeting that was held in his house. He passed out small cups to the head of each household and let them distribute it to their families. Tom and Wilson usually followed suit at their homes, and since Lindsay and I could not yet host meetings, we offered nothing different. There was never any discussion or disagreement as to how communion was served, and we all respected the host's method.

## 6

From the time of our very first meeting, the Crawfords as well as our family had come to a certain understanding of scripture that encouraged men to rise up as leaders, and their wives to quietly support them. This meant that they were to refrain from teaching or having authority over men in the meetings of the church. It was never clear as to where exactly the line should be drawn between teaching and sharing, and even our own two families had debated the issue. There was never a formal teaching given that the women were to remain silent in the meeting, but Lindsay and Cheryl practiced what they believed, and it often showed. The issue had come up the very first meeting the Smiths ever attended, but we decided to hold off on discussing it further. The first week the meeting was ever held at the Cook's, Ralph decided to make a point to say that he wanted to encourage the women, Lindsay and Cheryl included, to speak up and feel free to share and pray. He told us that he did not think the Scriptures meant that women were to remain silent, and that believing so was a wrong view of scripture. During the following prayer time though, all the wives were silent, including his wife Martha. Wilson's wife Leah frequently shared and would even expound on scripture, as well as nudge her husband when she thought he should move on or be quiet. Martha hardly ever spoke during the meeting, and Cheryl and Lindsay usually remained silent. Tom's mother Susan, although desiring to remain quiet and not teach men, often shared and taught from her vast experience in the Lord, usually prefacing what she was to say with "Now I'm not teaching y'all." Ralph's speech had felt somehow intrusive to our two families, and was very disturbing as to the peace of our fellowship. Nothing was said though, and we moved along as if nothing had happened. The women for the most part remained quiet, and the men respected each other's beliefs, opting for unity rather than disunity.

The fellowship had been meeting for almost 8 months now, and our growth had been steady and focused. We were maturing as families and as men. One thing we had not shown significant growth in though, was the involvement of the children in our meetings. Although the children were growing accustomed to a new way of doing things, and were better behaved, they were often disinterested spectators. We had made plans to keep them involved by singing, having them read scripture, and answering well-placed questions. But it was hard for men like Wilson and Ralph to do such things when they were so accustomed to a different way. With Tom and I having such young children, we were often more concerned with having them sit quietly and listen than actively engaging the other children. It was very difficult for the young children to not be distracted with all of their friends sitting around them in an environment that is usually conducive to playtime (the living room). Some families allowed their children to bring toys, or coloring books, while others desired for their children to sit quietly and attentively during the meeting of the people of God. Ralph did not want to drive his children to “hate” church, and felt that they should enjoy it. Wilson did not have a strong opinion either way, but allowed his children to do whatever, as long as they were not disruptive. The fellowship lacked a clear vision for the particular level of involvement in the meetings. There was however a vision for the involvement of the boys in the brother’s meetings. Before we even tried doing a brother’s meeting, I envisioned the boys participating and witnessing their fathers and elder brothers wrestling with the things of God. It would be a time that we could encourage them to be men of faith, and teach them the things of God. It would be a time of discipleship, and training up the men who would one day be the future elders of our church. The vision was one that only men with a multi-generational view of life can see, and was therefore hard to pass on to the other men. Tom and Ralph were also the only men with boys in the meetings. Ralph’s son Brad was around 6 years old, and could answer his dad’s theological questions when prompted, but was not being raised to be a strong Christian man. Tom’s two sons, Daniel and Noah were both under three years old and were also difficult to involve in any way. Daniel was able to recite scripture and also answer some questions, but the boys mostly ran around and played with toys. When the men became involved in serious conversations it was also hard to think of involving the boys in any way, and I’m not sure anyone other than myself even wanted to try.

Unlike the leadership/brother's meetings, where only men 12 and older were invited, all male bodies were to be present in the Sunday brother's meetings. This was sometimes a difficult proposition for the Crawford's family. Their youngest, Noah, was a bit of a momma's boy, and would not stay in the brother's meeting without screaming. Since this prevented Tom from being able to participate himself, he would often allow Noah to run inside to sit with Cheryl. The men would sometimes briefly chastise Tom for not keeping Noah with him, but were probably often glad to have the peace and quiet back. From the first week my first son Asher was born, I made a point to have him in the brother's meetings at all times, except for when he was nursing with his mother. I had hoped that this might perhaps put pressure on Tom, and any other future fathers, to keep all their sons in our meetings. I felt it was very important to have our sons grow up being around mature Christian talk that was manly and dealt with issues head on. Of course, they would also see the times that we sat on the porch talking of nothing important at all, and starrng off into the yard.

Although the women's meetings always seemed to be more productive, or at least more consistently productive, than the brother's meetings, the women seemed to be even worse at involving the children. The ladies were so delighted to have time to fellowship with other adult women that they were content to let the young girls run around and play. There were times when the girls would work on crafts and learn to be industrious, but usually it was the mothers engaged in deep conversation, oblivious to the children running around them. The sisters meetings were supposed to be modeled after Titus chapter 2 and allow the women to encourage each other in home-making, child rearing, and being loving wives to their husbands. The ladies usually focused on a specific topic that the host would pick the week before. They might all come prepared to discuss frugal shopping, or come with their favorite recipes. It was a wonderful time for the women to grow in their roles as mothers and wives, and the husbands were thankful for the fruit of it.

## 7

The fellowship was in somewhat of a lull from January to March 2004. During that time, our family was blessed with our first son, Asher, and the Smiths continued to quietly seek a job for Wilson. The prospect of their leaving for Ohio kept us in somewhat of a

state of flux. In March met for an outdoor gathering at Lettuce Lake Park, the site of the fellowship's second ever meeting, for a cookout. We had a great time at the park, and the fathers took all the children on a walk through the park to give the ladies a chance to catch up. With the exception of Lily tripping on a root and falling face first into the boardwalk, and Daniel falling out of a tree, it was a nice peaceful time of fellowship.

In the last week of March, Tom received a call from a family that said they were interested in coming to fellowship with us one Sunday. They came that very Sunday to a meeting at the Cook's house. Paul Thomas came with five of his seven children that morning. The family filed into the house and took their places around their father. Paul's wife, Leslie, had given birth to a new son just a few weeks earlier, and had stayed home to care for the baby and the next youngest daughter. Paul shared his background and how he came to be a follower of the Lord. He told us that he had come from a large Baptist church in town that was familiar to us all. He explained how they had come from Atlanta just 6 months earlier, and had previously been somewhat involved in a homechurch in Houston, Texas. They had enjoyed the fellowship there, and wanted a family friendly church to raise their children in. He shared stories of his time in the military, with his children whispering in his ear specific details to relay to us. The children were well behaved and ranged from 5 to 12 years old. Paul was very comfortable in joining in on the discussions and participated right away in the brother's meetings. He was very likeable, and was knowledgeable in the scriptures. Wilson took an immediate liking to him and welcomed him to the fellowship, telling him "there's no going back."

The Lord impressed upon us during that time the impact each family had upon our fellowship. It became clear that every new family was a gift from God, as if He had said "Here, I have another present I want to give to you." We all felt so blessed that a wonderful family like the Thomas's had joined us in our work. It was also great to have another family that embraced the same convictions concerning family size as the Crawford's and our own family. Beyond that, Paul seemed to be an elder qualified man who could be a great benefit to us in his experience in raising a large family. His presence was felt at once. Paul was a strong man who was very outspoken and direct. He had confidence in his abilities and in his understanding of scripture. He did not directly challenge anything in our fellowship, but showed a willingness to help us move along.

In April, Lindsay and I purchased a new home. We looked for more than three-months for a house that would be suitable for our family, and the church. We strongly desired to be able to host meetings ourselves, and relieve the burden of the other three families. Paul volunteered to help us prepare the house almost every night for an entire week. It was a great time of bonding, and there was a connection made between myself and Paul. I looked forward to the advice and discipleship I knew Paul would be able to provide. I was able to communicate to him, during that time, my vision for the church as well as all the reasons we did the things we did. I respected his studies and conclusions, but found that we did disagree on a few things. One of the issues we briefly discussed was the role of our wives in the church. When I found that Paul did a lot of inductive studies, I asked what his view on a popular female inductive study teacher was. He explained why he believed it was alright in certain instances for a woman to teach men. I told him my own understanding on the issue, and we moved on to a different discussion. I felt more comfortable talking openly with Paul than I did with Wilson or Ralph. Our whole fellowship praised the Lord together for His gifts to us and His blessings on our assembly through adding to our number.

## 8

A few weeks after the Thomas' met with us for the first time, we gathered at my parent's house for an Easter celebration. It felt as if our small body was now growing, and there was a real sense of health in our fellowship. We were growing in our relationships with each other and the Lord, and our numbers were also rising. I had recently put together a website for our group where we could list menu, study topic, dates and locations of meetings, and a small journal open to all. On Easter Sunday I brought along a camera to take pictures of our group so that we could post them on our website. Although the Thomas's had only known us a few weeks, we felt as if they were a part of the group, and accepted them as if they always had been there. The picture was a way to seal our fellowship in history. That Sunday, Paul had also announced to the Sunday School group they had been attending, that they would not be meeting with that church any longer. They had truly decided to join us in our labors. The Thomas family brought our total number of people to (what seemed to us) an amazing twenty-eight!

After a fairly slow 6 months, in which I had been primarily distracted by a musical group I was in, I returned to the steadfast study of the Word and doctrines of the church. Although the men held each other to a certain superficial level of accountability, through the men's meetings, there was a lack of depth and challenge to each other's faith. Our teaching also lacked that depth, so they family's were often left to fill that void through some other means. The Thomas's presence in our fellowship sparked a small reformation in our family as we realized God's grace and providence. Only He could provide us with what we needed, when we needed it.