

A Homeschooler's History of Homeschooling

Part V

The Gentle Spirit Controversy

Summer of 1994-Winter of 1995

*Home-Centered Living; The House Church Movement;
Matthew 18: Church Discipline*

By Cheryl Lindsey Seelhoff

I have written this chapter of A Homeschooler's History of Homeschooling a little differently from previous chapters. I was at the center of this chapter, so I have written about it out of my own perspective as an eyewitness. What is most important about the Gentle Spirit controversy, in my opinion, to this discussion of homeschooling history, is not so much the specific details of the controversy itself, but what the controversy revealed about the beliefs, intentions and political agenda of some national Christian homeschooling leaders. Parts I-IV of this series are available in Gentle Spirit Vol. 6, No. 9, 10, 11 and Vol. 7, No. 1. You may order these via the order form on page 91 of this issue. Ed.

The Home-Centered Living Movement

By spring of 1994, the home-centered living movement had arrived at a kind of zenith. Subscriptions and orders for back issues of *Gentle Spirit Magazine* poured in steadily and in record numbers. There were other publications which supported home centered living: *Quit You Like Men*, *Patriarch*, *Above Rubies*, *Home School Digest*, and *HELP for Growing Families*. There was a growing interest among many homeschoolers in gardening, small farming, homesteading, simple living,

bread-making, canning and food-preserving, home birth.

Along with the interest in home-centered living, a guardedness, or even outright antagonism, towards what some considered to be "worldly" had also been developing. Much of modern, allopathic medicine, immunizations for children, television, movies, many kinds of music, stylish dress fell under the "worldly" category. A "courtship" movement had emerged, with parents increasingly disavowing dating in favor of old-fashioned courtship, meaning no boy-girl relationships were permitted before young people were of marriageable age, permission of all parents was sought before courtship began, and young people entered into courtship with the express goal of marriage. Special curricula for girls stressing homemaking and motherhood and curricula for boys emphasizing traditional masculine roles had been created for these families.

At conservative Christian homeschooling conferences, "jumper moms" were *de rigueur* and visible. They wore sturdy, often homemade, jumpers along with sensible shoes, long hair, sometimes head coverings. They were often pregnant, pushing a stroller or wearing a back- or front-pack with a child stashed snugly inside. Many in the homeschooling movement had renounced birth control in favor of the "Full Quiver" philosophy and theology, the idea that birth control was wrong and sinful and

that parents should leave the number of children they would bear "in the Lord's hands."

The beliefs of those in the home-centered living movement, popular as they were with some, were also a source of contention among conservative Christians, some of whom were set against what they viewed as a movement in the direction of pietism or asceticism, which they viewed as an unbiblical retreat from the challenges of 20th century life, a time when they believed Christians should be actively working to change the prevailing culture and political climate. Others viewed home-centered-living advocates as hippies and its philosophies as hearkening to the '60s back-to-the-land movement; a time they believed was characterized by rebellion and immorality, and hence the movement was viewed as guilty by association. Some viewed the movement as legalistic and overly-concerned with externals such as dress and entertainment. Editorials critical of the home centered living movement and its advocates began to appear in homeschooling publications and newsletters.

The House Church Movement

The holiness emphasis of the home-centered living movement, together with its family-centered philosophies, resulted in a growing home church movement nationwide, with homeschoolers leaving their churches to begin meeting together in homes.

Homeschoolers often felt out of place in traditional churches, where many of the families sent their children to public school, mothers often worked outside the home, and families were divided for worship, with babies sent to the church nursery and children going off to Sunday School classes away from their parents and one another. Homeschooling families tended to prefer to stay together for worship, and almost all were traditional; the mothers stayed at home and the fathers worked outside the home. Often homeschooling families felt ostracized or experienced criticism or hostility in the traditional church from families who resented their choices for reasons I have already described. Given that this was so, the movement towards house churches full of homeschoolers made sense.

Often living out in the country, on small farms and with large families, without television and with reading material strictly restricted or monitored, homeschooling and meeting in homes for church, these people became increasingly separated from other homeschoolers and from mainstream life. They often felt that God had led them to this lifestyle, that they were part of a "remnant" of obedient Christians in a time in which most Christians were less obedient. They looked to the Amish, Conservative Mennonites, and other "plain" churches as role models, devoured their books and tracts, and often used the Conservative Mennonite *Rod and Staff* curriculum in their homeschooling. There was a sense of excitement, urgency and camaraderie which was contagious, a sense that home-centered-living folks were part of something cutting-edge and important. And as is to be expected, the ongoing criticism the movement received only served to draw these families more closely together.

Those outside the movement, on the other hand, were sometimes alarmed by the dramatic changes they saw in their homeschooling friends and family members, who sometimes left their churches or even severed contact with them in the interests of "holiness" or biblical "separation", who began to dress, talk, worship, behave and live very differently. Like the homeschooling movement, the home-centered living movement and home

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church movement were grass roots and diverse. There was no one central leader or governing body to whom to appeal, there were no written organizational documents or rules and regulations. For this reason, it was difficult for those within and without the movement to address excesses or problems when they occurred. Generally, house churches did not have elders or pastors. Members were young and it was believed only men with grown children could serve in these positions. In the absence of elders or pastors, most of the house churches agreed to resolve conflicts which arose by prayer and studying pertinent Bible passages. The idea was that in any conflict, the Bible provided the answers; it was a matter of sincere men applying themselves to understanding what the Bible had to say.

An incident from my own experience might provide insight as to what frequently happened when homeschoolers began organizing house churches.

In the late 1980s and early '90s my family was part of a house church consisting entirely of homeschooling families along the lines I have already described. We met on Sundays for a morning service at someone's home, then enjoyed a meal together and usually spent the entire afternoon together. In our group, as was fairly typical, men led the meetings and women were silent. We women held midweek meetings where we read and discussed Christian books together, and sometimes we got together to cook, can fruits and vegetables, garden or make bread while the children played.

At one point, without thinking too much about it, our family invited a nonhomeschooling family to our house church meeting. This was a family in need, and our children had been friends with their children. To our surprise, other house church members strenuously objected to this, asserting that all church members should be consulted before anyone was invited to meetings. We had believed that church meetings were for all who wanted to attend; we had never heard

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of excluding anyone from church meetings before, for any reason. That some might not want us to invite outsiders did not even occur to us.

What we learned in this experience – what homeschoolers in house churches all over the country would learn, among other things – was that although we may have shared many external practices in common – parenting styles, dress styles, homeschooling, home-centered lifestyles, full-quiver beliefs –we differed significantly in important and foundational matters of doctrine—something none of us had anticipated. Discovering the existence of these doctrinal differences after we had left our respective churches in favor of house church and found ourselves embroiled in conflicts was, for many of us, a rude awakening.

Matthew 18

Unable to resolve the many differences among us, ultimately, in our own house church, we thought it would be best to leave this particular house church group and to begin meeting in our own home with those

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whose theology more closely matched our own, including the family excluded by the original church. To our surprise, our decision to leave was met with vehement resistance by some house church members, who now told us it was wrong and sinful for us to leave the group!

We were then asked to meet repeatedly with members of the old group to discuss and attempt to resolve our differences. These meetings, which usually lasted into the wee hours, were wildly unsuccessful and made everything much worse. It seemed to us that the differences between us were the same as those which had divided “Calvinist” or “Reformed” Christians from Lutherans, Arminians, Wesleyan and Anabaptist Christians since the time of the Protestant Reformation or before. Our reasoning was, if devout men and women of faith through the centuries had been unable to resolve these differences, how would we be able to resolve them in our small house church?

Nevertheless some members of our house church insisted we had an obligation to try and if we didn't try, we

would be guilty of offending them and should be subject to church discipline according to Matthew 18. (1) After many meetings, exhausted and at an impasse, we invited older church members from various churches in the surrounding community to attend one of our meetings as witnesses, with the hopes that they might serve as mediators, might help us come to some resolution. In the end, no solutions were found, our differences were not resolved, and our parting was not amicable.

I have received many, many letters from homeschooling members of house churches across the country whose experiences were similar to the one I have described. While Christian homeschoolers shared a belief in home-centered living, their doctrinal differences were and are often significant. Conservative evangelicals, in general, teach only their own doctrines and beliefs and history in their churches; they do not ordinarily teach their members how their beliefs are distinctive, and how they differ from the beliefs of other Christians. Normally, conservative Christians do not meet together or worship together with those who do not share their doctrinal distinctives. This being so, homeschoolers, thrown together in homeschooling support groups with Christians from every conceivable background for the first time in their lives, at first naively assumed that their Christian beliefs were shared or at least quite similar. It was quite a shock to learn how deep and important the differences really were.

Increasingly, as difficulties arose and conflicts erupted, house church members and homeschoolers in homeschool groups, as well, began to invoke Matthew 18 passages relating to church discipline whenever even relatively minor conflicts or differences arose. In part this was due, again, to doctrinal differences; Christians out of some traditions are more apt to invoke Matthew 18 than Christians out of other traditions. In part, though, this invoking of Matthew 18 was, I believe, rooted in a desire to control or force outcomes. Invoking Matthew 18 and the specter of bringing in witnesses and possible excommunication was a surefire way to close down honest discussion, to silence dissent, and to force others to agree or comply.

This increasing reliance on Matthew 18 in homeschoolers' house churches was a portent of what would eventually take place in the statement of faith homeschooling community in general, nationally. The example I've shared provides a sort of microcosm, a "small world," reflecting what would eventually take place in the larger Christian homeschooling community and what could conceivably take place in nationally in and outside of Christian circles should conservative Christians assume positions of political power and influence as they are trying to do.

The Gentle Spirit Controversy

In the spring of 1994, I separated from my husband of 19 years and began a relationship with my current husband, whom I married in September of 1995. In making this decision, I was operating according to my own internal compass, guided by my own deep sense of what was ethical and morally right.

But conservative Christian homeschooling leaders would not see things as I saw them; of that I was fairly certain. I had been publishing articles encouraging Christian women to be chaste, obedient, submissive, keepers at home; now I seemed to be turning against everything I had been standing for. In truth, my own decisions cannot be evaluated apart from the context of all of the circumstances of my life; circumstances which were deeply personal and not appropriate to share publicly. Knowing what the likely reaction to my decision might be, I had withdrawn from my church shortly after separating from my husband. The pastor, nevertheless, in my absence, set the wheels of Matthew 18 church discipline in motion against me.

Informed that Rick might have accompanied me to a homeschooling conference where I was the keynote speaker, the pastor and his wife contacted me on the eve of the speaking engagement – planned over a year prior – and told me I should either withdraw as a speaker or tell the conference sponsor I was separated from my husband and had committed adultery. After intense and sometimes angry discussion, I went on to speak at the conference.

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My ex-husband then contacted another conference speaker, Gregg Harris, and told him I had filed for divorce and committed adultery, then asked Harris to watch me while I was at the conference. Harris invited me to breakfast and made pointed inquiry about my marriage. He went on to make some rather cryptic observations relating to the homeschooling community and what might happen if I should fall out of favor with its members and leaders. Wondering who he might have talked to, I asked him, point-blank: "Why are you telling me all this?" He answered, "I don't know."

Gregg would later testify that he never saw anything amiss at the conference, where he was also a keynote speaker. We both spoke to appreciative audiences and returned to our respective homes. Once home, Gregg obtained Rick's phone number through directory assistance, called him, posing as a hotel employee, and asked whether Rick might have left a phone card at the conference. Believing Gregg was a hotel employee, Rick responded that he might have.

Armed with this information, Gregg called and discussed the situation with my former pastor, then called Sue Welch of *The Teaching Home Magazine*, advising Welch that I had filed for divorce, committed adultery, and was under church discipline according to Matthew 18. Welch then contacted me insisting that I immediately stop speaking and publishing *Gentle Spirit*. My former pastor contacted me and also told me that I should quit speaking and quit publishing. Both my former pastor and Sue Welch consulted with homeschooling leader and attorney Michael Farris as to how they should proceed. When I would not comply, I was publicly excommunicated at a Sunday morning service in the church I had not attended for months by the reading of a letter of

discipline, denouncing me as an unrepentant adulteress.

I then received a call from the chairman of the state homeschooling organization which had sponsored the conference from which I had just returned. He said he had discussed my situation with my pastor, with Sue Welch, and with my ex-husband. He told me that if I did not repent, then perform a series of "proofs of repentance," he would make it known to the homeschooling community nationally that I was an unrepentant adulteress. The proofs of repentance included returning my honorarium, paying for my own plane tickets and expenses for the conference, never answering my telephone, relinquishing my post office box, never going online, never going anywhere alone, breaking off my relationship with Rick, firing my lawyer, withdrawing my divorce filing and restraining orders, turning over all of my bank accounts to my former pastor or some other individual, stepping down as publisher of *Gentle Spirit*, canceling all of my speaking engagements, sending a written apology to a number of national homeschooling leaders, agreeing never to defend myself, reconciling with my former husband, and agreeing to attend two weeks of intensive marriage counseling in the Midwest with my former husband. There was also discussion of fulfilling my obligations to *Gentle Spirit* subscribers with subscriptions to *The Teaching Home*. I refused to perform these proofs of repentance.

In the days following my refusal, Sue Welch and members of *The Teaching Home* staff, members of Mary Pride's *Home Life* staff, and other national homeschooling leaders, after consulting, again, with Michael Farris, circulated the letter of church discipline to my advertisers, homeschool conference organizers, columnists and the heads of more than 40 state

The implications of this particular view of Matthew 18 are of great significance in a time when conservative Christians are seeking greater and greater degrees of political influence and power nationally. Removed from the context of the local church, a community of Christians living in close proximity who are known to one another and who care for one another, passages relating to church discipline can become dangerous weapons, tools of control which the powerful may use against the less powerful in all sorts of circumstances.

homeschooling organizations. The letter of discipline included the information that I had committed adultery, had filed for divorce without “scriptural grounds,” and that I was unrepentant. It urged readers to “consider” their support of *Gentle Spirit* in light of this information which was being circulated.

The news quickly hit the internet where I was regularly excoriated over many months by conservative Christians who denounced me as a whore, a Jezebel, a harlot, a liar, a false teacher, a wolf in sheep’s clothing. The news was published in five separate homeschooling publications in succeeding months, several of which inferred or stated outright that *Gentle Spirit* was no longer being published. My advertisers canceled their ads, my columnists resigned, subscription cancellations and demands for refunds poured into my office. Subscribers reported me to the Washington Attor-

ney General and the Postal Inspector. Rumors flew and I was unable to address or refute them. Within a few months, *Gentle Spirit* was all but destroyed.

Word of what had happened eventually reached homeschoolers outside of conservative Christian circles, and in general, they were appalled and expressed shock and disbelief. *Gentle Spirit* was an independent, for-profit business, a sole proprietorship, unaffiliated with any church or homeschooling organization. It was not a ministry and did not receive tithes or offerings; instead, subscribers paid \$22 per year to receive a monthly magazine. The magazine was read and enjoyed not only by conservative Christians but by nonchristians and people of divergent religious beliefs for its practical content relating to home-centered living. In investigating and discussing my personal affairs with my ex-pastor, then circu-

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lating personal information about me in the homeschooling marketplace, conservative Christian homeschooling leaders had communicated their position and belief that the homeschooling marketplace, and the marketplace, in general, is an appropriate venue for the application of church discipline on a national scale.

The implications of this particular view of Matthew 18 are of great significance in a time when conservative Christians are seeking greater and greater degrees of political influence and power nationally. Removed from the context of the local church, a community of Christians living in close proximity who are known to one another and who care for one another, passages relating to church discipline become dangerous weapons, tools of control which the powerful may use against the less powerful in all sorts of circumstances. The passages relating to church discipline can be and increasingly have been and are being used by national and local homeschooling leaders, homeschool groups, and regular homeschoolers to stifle dissent, to silence criticism (by asserting that someone’s critical or opposing views have “caused offense”), to abrupt communication and obstruct channels of communication, and, as I have described, to marginalize, exclude or otherwise exercise control over individuals and businesses in the homeschooling marketplace.

A document co-authored in 1989 by homeschooling leader Michael Farris and Dr. Virginia Armstrong, *The Christian World View of Law*, offers insight into the views and agenda of those who believe it is correct for homeschooling leaders to move to censor, silence or discipline others in the homeschooling marketplace and in homeschool support groups as happened in the *Gentle Spirit* controversy of 1994. In recent years, as we will see in future chapters of *A Homeschooler’s History of Homeschooling*, these views have been increasingly applied in all sorts of ways by Christian homeschooling leaders and individual homeschoolers. In at least one instance , homeschoolers have been publically urged to invoke Matthew 18 even over differences in parenting styles and homeschooling philosophies and theo-

ries, where one person believes another's homeschooling style is wrong. In other instances, Matthew 18 has been invoked to silence discussions of the *Gentle Spirit* controversy and other controversial topics which were on the internet and in other venues. Read carefully, this document proposes, as the following portions evidence, that biblical law should form the basis for civil law in the United States, and that church discipline, even when it includes actions which violate the laws of the land, should receive legal protection. It additionally advocates civil disobedience as appropriate when Christians believe civil laws are unbiblical. Carried out to their logical conclusions, these affirmations and denials support an agenda and the creation of a society in which events like those which occurred in the *Gentle Spirit* controversy would be viewed as proper and just.

"3. We affirm that a society inevitably must choose between conflicting legal foundations and views of law and should choose Christian views and a Christian foundation because the Christian system is vastly superior to all alternatives; it is empirically defensible, internally logical, comprehensive in scope, etc.

We deny that a society may avoid choosing between conflicting legal foundations and views of law and that any non-Christian system is superior or equal to the Christian system.

5. We affirm that it is the vital and unavoidable responsibility of the true Christian community in every society to seek in every Biblically consistent way to hold its society's views of law true to Biblical principles, and that when societies choose non-Christian views of law they can expect little long-term blessing from God and many severely adverse consequences.

We deny that the Christian community properly fulfills its calling to make disciples of every nation and to be salt and light to the world when it fails to do all in its power to hold society's views of law true to Biblical principles.

...22. We affirm that the fact that the Bible expresses fundamental spiritual/religious truth in no way diminishes its usefulness, or undermines its validity, as a proper guide to civil law; that the Bible is therefore a guidebook both for man's spiritual/religious life and for society's legal life; and that it is therefore to be followed by civil law as it sets standards for societal conduct.

We deny that the fundamental spiritual/religious truths set forth in Scripture detract from the Bible's usefulness or validity as a guide for civil law, and that founding civil law on Biblically expressed standards amounts to an "establishment of the Christian or Jewish religion."

...25. We affirm that standards and principles set forth in the Old Testament apply to civil law today, provided that they are repeated in the New Testament in such a way as to be applicable to civil law today.

We deny that principles set forth in the Old Testament are irrelevant to civil law today.

26. We affirm that principles expressed in the Old Testament, whether or not repeated in the New Testament, apply to civil law today unless those principles are limited by their immediate context or by other scriptures to circumstances not existing today, or unless those principles are abrogated by subsequent scripture (e.g., many Old Testament laws were designed for Old Testament theocratic Israel and are therefore not applicable to the nontheocratic civil law of today).

30. We affirm that because Christians have unique access to the deepest knowledge of God and His truth they have a special capacity and responsibility before God and man to influence civil law to conform to God's standards, and that the Christian's responsibility regarding civil law is compatible with, and closely related to, his responsibilities in evangelism, discipleship, and similar activities.

93. We affirm that disobedience to civil law on the part of the Christian may be Biblically proper or even necessary under certain circumstances (e.g., when civil law commands the Christian to render to the civil authority what belongs to God [such as worship], or when civil law commands the Christian to violate God's Law [for instance, to murder]).

94. We affirm that the Bible recognizes several responses a citizen may make to ungodly civil laws, including some not involving civil disobedience (e.g., minimizing conflict, appealing to civil authorities for remedial action, and leaving the jurisdiction of the oppressive civil authority) and some involving civil disobedience.

...We further urge that these ... goals above be pursued in conjunction with the following more specific goals:

2.1 Liberty of Worship

2.1.2. Opposing the use of the civil tort system to restrict the ability of churches to exercise Biblical discipline upon their own members;

2.1.5. Recognizing in law that internal church policies and disputes regarding church policy, doctrine, and property should be handled according to internal church documents without an imposition of civil law that contradicts these internal standards."(2).●

Footnotes:

(1) Matthew 18 passages relating to church discipline are as follows:

Moreover, if they brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou has gained thy brother.

But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.

And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church; but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen and a publican.

(v. 15-17)

In general, the first step of church discipline is to tell your brother that he has trespassed against you, offended you, or sinned against you and attempt to work it out between the two of you. If you can't, then you are to bring two or three witnesses who will confirm that you attempted to work out your difficulties and who will help you to work out your difficulties. If this is unsuccessful, the third step, according to some conservative Christians, is to excommunicate the offender (the sinner or the one who has trespassed. Please note that the conservative Christian view, the view many statement-of-faith homeschooling leaders take, is only one view. There are many ways to view this particular passage; sincere Christians differ.

(2)Dr. Virginia C. Armstrong, Ph.D., and Michael Farris. *The Christian World View of Law*, The Coalition on Revival, Inc., P.O. Box A, Sunnyvale, California 94087, 1989. This document was prepared for the Coalition on Revival. COR's vision is stated in this same document as follows:

"COR's vision is to see Christians everywhere doing all they can in the power of the Holy Spirit to take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ (2 Cor. 10:5), in every aspect of life. Toward that end, we have developed a series of worldview documents that set forth what we believe are the fundamental and essential points of the total Christian world and life view. The COR worldview documents state what we believe are the biblical principles for all spheres of human life including theology, evangelism, discipleship, law, civil governments, economics, education, family, medicine, psychology and counseling, arts and media, business and professions, and science and technology. We believe that the COR worldview documents state where the entire Church must stand and what action it must take to accomplish its task in the remaining years of the Twentieth Century and on into the next century."

The first four chapters of A Homeschooler's History of Homeschooling may be obtained by ordering back issues of Gentle Spirit as follows:

- Vol. 6, No. 9: A Homeschooler's History of Homeschooling, Part I Fathers of Homeschooling, Early Years of Homeschooling through 1990**
- Vol. 6, No. 10: Part II: Influences: Unschooling, Bill Gothard, Raymond and Dorothy Moore**
- Vol. 6, No. 11: 1992-93**
- Vol. 7, No. 1: H.R. 6**