

Ekklesia . . .

**TO THE ROOTS OF BIBLICAL HOUSE CHURCH LIFE**

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To my wife, Sandy, who has stood faithfully by me during my ecclesiological pilgrimage; to my late dad, Tommy, whose vision and support made this book possible; and to my step-mom, Lucie, for her help and

interest in seeing God's Word spread throughout the world.

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## ***INTRODUCTION***

*Ekklesia* is the Greek word that is often translated “church.” God, in His providence, has shown us some areas of church practice that we believe have been neglected by the church at large. We are persuaded that a return to the ways that the original apostles did things could bring a tremendous blessing to the Bride of Christ. Those of us who participated in the writing of this book have enjoyed these blessings for years, and desire very much to see all who belong to Jesus feast at the banquet along with us.

We advocate orthodox, historic, classic Christianity poured into the wineskin of New Testament church practice, as established by the apostles and revealed on the pages of the Bible. Thus, what we advocate herein concerns *orthopraxy* (right behavior), rather than *orthodoxy* (right theology). Our goal is to be Christ honoring and thoroughly biblical in every area concerning our church life. Thus, in the pages that follow, we argue strongly from Scripture for such things as

living room sized churches, the Lord's Supper as a full meal, church leaders as servants (rather than lords), government by consensus, the right and responsibility of the brothers to make decisions corporately, no clergy-laity distinction, and interactive (participatory) church meetings. As is evident from the above, just because we advocate a home-based, relational, family-styled church does not mean that we think careful attention to order and organization to be unimportant. Some believers will occasionally object: "All that really matters is that we love Jesus, right?" Loving Jesus is indeed the central issue. However, Jesus Himself insisted that those who do love Him will obey what He commanded: "whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves Me" (Jn 14:15-21). To listen to the voice of Christ, as Head of His church and the Captain of our souls, is of utmost importance. And, Jesus had some specific commands about His church. Thus we see that it takes both the wine and the wine skin, both the precept and the pattern. Without dispute the wine skin exists for the sake of the wine, but without the skin the wine spills to the ground and is wasted. It is a false dichotomy to hold to either one without the other. Attention to both is needed.

While we are firmly convinced that God's best is for all His people to organize their churches according to NT patterns, we are not "against" everyone else. One thing we are against is divisiveness or the blanket condemnation of our brothers who see things differently than we do. Our desire is not to come across as judgmental or overly critical. Matters of church practice are much in the same category as the issue of differences over the proper mode of baptism (immersion, pouring, or sprinkling?). People of faith can be found in each camp. Assuming that the Lord prefers one approach over the other, then the other methods are "wrong." Are the wrong groups therefore in sin? Are they thus not true churches? Will God refuse to work in and through them? Heaven forbid! While they may be in violation of God's best, it is an honest, sincere blunder in a completely different category than moral failings such as lying, theft, murder, rebellion, etc. We understand that faithful, Godly saints sometimes see the same Scripture

passages differently. As Paul asked, “Who are you to judge someone else’s servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand” (Ro 14:4). We respectfully present this book to the church at large for consideration. It is the result of both years of study and day to day practical experience. We simply ask that you search the Scriptures as did the Bereans to see if these things be so. This entire study of the church is only a stepping stone to put us in a better position of being all Christ wants us to be as His body of people. May the Lord be pleased to grant all His people an ever deeper knowledge of Himself and His Bride — Stephen E. Atkerson, Editor

## **1**

### ***APOSTOLIC TRADITION — OBSOLETE?***

Suppose a newly planted first century congregation in Alexandria, Egypt, wrote a letter to the apostles in Jerusalem. Imagine that this church consisted of Jewish believers who had heard the gospel on a visit to Jerusalem. Now that they were back home in Egypt, they didn’t quite know what to do next. So, in their letter to the apostles was a series of questions about church life:

“Dear Apostles . . .

Why is it that we meet together as God’s people?

What should we do in our meetings?

How often should we meet?

Does it matter where we meet?

Should we build a temple like in Jerusalem? Or at least a synagogue building?

What type of church government should we have?

What should we look for in church leaders?

Do we even need leaders?

What is the purpose of the Lord’s Supper?

How often should we eat it? Annually, like Passover?

Should we eat the Lord's Supper as a true meal or a token ritual?"

How do you suppose the twelve apostles would have answered their letter? Would they have written that each church was free to do what ever it wanted to do? That each church should just pray and follow the Holy Spirit's leading? That each congregation should be unique and different, free from outside influence? Or, might the apostles have answered with very specific instructions? With a particular way of doing things? With a definite agenda? With unmistakable guidelines?

This issue has been faced by believers for the past 2,000 years. How, exactly, should the church view apostolic patterns for church practice? Is the practice of the early church merely optional, or is it imperative for us? Are the traditions of the apostles interesting history or should they constitute some kind of normative church practice?

Our problem is compounded because the New Testament has almost nothing to say by way of direct command concerning church matters. Currently, it is popular to dismiss New Testament patterns as optional. Fee and Stuart, in their book, *How To Read The Bible For All Its Worth*, state: "Our assumption, along with many others, is that unless Scripture explicitly tells us we must do something, what is merely narrated or described can never function in a normative way" (p. 97, first edition). This is generally true. No one, for instance, would advocate following Jephthah's tragic example in Judges 11:29ff. The question for us is whether or not Scripture explicitly tells us that we must copy the patterns for church practice described in the New Testament.

Suppose we accepted the notion that New Testament patterns are not to be normative. Into what might this lead us?

1. We could construct a massive, opulent cathedral.
2. We could meet on Tuesdays rather than on Sunday, the Lord's Day.

3. We could meet monthly, rather than weekly (this will be more to the liking of the modern generation, which dislikes commitment).
4. We might also opt to have no leaders at all (no pastors, no elders, no deacons) since nowhere in Scripture are we directly commanded to have any.
5. We could have absolutely no form of church government whatsoever, since no particular form of government is commanded in Scripture. Ours will be rule by anarchy! Every man can just do what is right in his own eyes in fulfillment of Judges 21:25.
6. The Lord's Supper can be celebrated every ten years or so (we wouldn't want it to become too common and lose its significance).
7. Since the New Testament does not specifically prohibit it, we can swell our membership ranks by baptizing infants, or maybe even the deceased (1Co 15:29).
8. New believers could be organized into loose confederations of Bible studies, not official churches, since the New Testament never states we must form churches.

Obviously, this hypothetical "church" would be quite absurd. *Yet, technically it would violate no positive command of Scripture.* What would be missing is at least a partial adherence to New Testament patterns for church practice. Most churches do follow *some* of the patterns of the New Testament, but not all of the patterns. The question is, *why not?*

What is argued for in this book is consistency. We propose that the apostles had a definite and very particular way in which they organized churches. We also propose that they intended for all churches to follow these same apostolic patterns for as long as the church exists, thus including us today.

### **HOLDING TO APOSTOLIC TRADITION IS LOGICAL**

In 1 Corinthians 4:14-17, we read that Paul planned to send Timothy to Corinth. Paul wanted Timothy to remind the Corinthians of his way of life so that they could imitate him. Thus Paul wrote, "I urge you to imitate me. For this reason I am sending to you Timothy, my son

whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord. He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church.”

Notice the uniformity of practice that is implied by Paul’s words. His way of life in Christ was consistent with what he taught “everywhere in every church”. There was integrity. There was a uniformity of practice that grew out of Paul’s teachings. His belief determined his behavior. His doctrine determined his duty. Similarly, *the apostles’ beliefs about the function of the church would naturally have affected the way they organized churches* (the form of the church). Thus, holding to apostolic tradition is logical.

If anyone understood the purpose of the church, surely the apostles did. They were handpicked and hand-trained by Jesus over a three year period. Then, our Lord appeared to them over a forty day period after His resurrection. Finally, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to teach them things He had not taught them before (John 14-16). Thus, whatever Jesus taught His apostles about the church was naturally reflected in the way they set up and organized churches.

In Titus 1:5 Paul wrote, “the reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished.” It is evident from this Scripture that the apostles did indeed have a definite way they wanted things done. It was not left up to each individual church to find its own way of doing things. There was obviously some kind of order, pattern, or tradition, that was followed in organizing the churches. Thus, in 1 Corinthians 11:34, Paul wrote, “the rest I will set in order when I come” (KJV).

Southern Baptist theologian J. L. Dagg astutely wrote in 1858 that the apostles “have taught us by example how to organize and govern churches. We have no right to reject their instruction and captiously insist that nothing but positive command shall bind us. Instead of choosing to walk in a way of our own devising, we should take pleasure to walk in the footsteps of those holy men from whom we have received the word of life . . . respect for the Spirit by which they were led should induce us to prefer their modes of organization and government to such as our inferior

wisdom might suggest" (*Manual of Church Order*, p. 84-86).

### **HOLDING TO APOSTOLIC TRADITION IS PRAISEWORTHY**

In 1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1, Paul urged the Corinthians to follow his example: "So whatever you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God - even as I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good, but the good of many, so that they may be saved. Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ."

The immediate context concerned seeking the good of others, so as to bring them to salvation. The word "follow" (1Co 11:1) is from *mimatai*, the basis for the word "mimic." Paul wanted the Corinthian believers to mimic or imitate him. Apparently they were doing well in imitating him in some matters, since Paul states in the very next verse, "I praise you because you remember me in everything, and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you" (NASV).

What is a tradition? The regular Greek word for "teaching" is *didaskalia* (the basis for "didactic"), but that is not the word used here. Instead, *paradosis* ("tradition") is used. A tradition is something (information or custom) which is handed down. It is an inherited pattern of thought or action. A popular definition might be, "things people *do* on a regular basis." This same Greek word (in verb form) is used in 1 Corinthians 11:23 in regard to the Lord's Supper (that it was "passed on"). The point of a tradition is that it is something that is passed on, from generation to generation.

Next, consider the word, "everything" as Paul used it in 1 Corinthians 11:2. It means "all that exists" or at least "all that pertains to the subject". When Paul wrote "everything" (1Co 11:2), what did he have in mind? How might "everything" apply to church order? His use of the word "everything" suggests that Paul's intended application was larger than just the exhortation found in 1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1 (evangelism). In fact, Paul was about to move on to that New

topic: head coverings.

Finally, what do the words “just as” (11:2) indicate about the degree of the Corinthian’s compliance with Paul’s “traditions”? They obviously adhered to every iota; it was sort of a photocopy effect! Paul praised them for holding to his traditions “just as” he passed them on to them. The apostles evidently designed for the churches to mimic the traditions they established. An interesting paradox can be observed about tradition. The same word (*paradosis*) used by Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:2 was also used by Jesus in Matthew 15:1-3. Jesus said to the Pharisees, “why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?” It is interesting that, whereas Jesus blasted the tradition of the Pharisees, Paul blessed the Corinthians for following the tradition of an apostle. Jewish tradition broke the command of God. Apostolic tradition, however, is consistent with the commands of Jesus. Holding to the tradition of the apostles is thus praiseworthy, as proven by Paul’s praise for the Corinthians.

#### **HOLDING TO APOSTOLIC TRADITION IS To Be Universal**

It is interesting to note that Paul quieted those inclined to be contentious about order in the churches by making an appeal to the universal practice of all the other churches: “If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice - nor do the churches of God” (1Co 11:16).

This statement was supposed to persuade the contentious people, to settle the argument. Obviously, prior emphasis had been given to certain practices that were done the same way everywhere, and that were *supposed to be* done the same way everywhere. Thus, 1 Corinthians 11:16 further indicates a uniformity of “practice” in New Testament churches.

It is beyond the scope of this study to deal with the particulars of head coverings. The point is that Paul expected all the churches to be doing the same thing. Just to realize that one was “different” was argument enough to silence opposition.

In 1 Corinthians 14:33b-34, Paul mentioned something else that was to be true in “all”

congregations: “As in *all the congregations* of the saints, women should remain silent in the *churches*.” Regardless of the correct application of this verse, notice how Paul again appeals to a universal pattern in all the churches as a basis for conformity.

Finally, note how Paul chided the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 14:36, “Did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached?” The obvious answer to both questions is “No.” This further indicates a uniformity of practice among New Testament churches. At least some of the Corinthians were something different from what all the other churches were doing. Evidently all the churches were expected to follow the same patterns in their church meetings. Holding to apostolic tradition was to be universal.

Jim Elliot, missionary martyr, wrote, “The pivot point hangs on whether or not God has revealed a universal pattern for the church in the New Testament. If He has not, then anything will do so long as it works. But I am convinced that nothing so dear to the heart of Christ as His Bride should be left without explicit instructions as to her corporate conduct. I am further convinced that the 20th century has in no way simulated this pattern in its method of ‘churching’ a community . . . it is incumbent upon me, if God has a pattern for the church, to find and establish that pattern, at all costs” (*Shadow of The Almighty: Life and Testimony of Jim Elliot*).

#### **HOLDING TO APOSTOLIC TRADITION BRINGS GOD’S PEACEFUL PRESENCE**

“Rejoice in the Lord always, I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” The main point of Philippians 4:4-7 is that we are to rejoice in the Lord and gain God’s peace, regardless of circumstances.

In the next paragraph of his letter (Php 4:8-9), the church at Philippi is given the secret for how to have the God of Peace be with them. By extension, this can be true for our churches as

well. Paul wrote, “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable - if anything is excellent or praiseworthy - think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me - put into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.”

In Philippians 4:9, the Philippians were instructed to put into practice “whatever” they learned, received, heard from Paul, or saw in Paul. Would this “whatever” not also include the way we see in the New Testament that Paul organized churches? To neglect apostolic tradition is to bypass God’s blessing. Churches that follow the New Testament pattern certainly will enjoy much more of God’s peaceful presence!

Watchman Nee, in *The Church And The Work: Rethinking The Work*, wrote, “Acts is the ‘genesis’ of the church’s history, and the Church in the time of Paul is the ‘genesis’ of the Spirit’s work . . . we must return to ‘the beginning.’ Only what God has set forth as our example in the beginning is the eternal Will of God. It is the Divine standard and our pattern for all time . . . God has revealed His Will, not only by giving orders, but by having certain things done in His church, so that in the ages to come others might simply look at the pattern and know His will” (p. 8-9).

### **HOLDING TO APOSTOLIC TRADITION IS COMMANDED**

In 2 Thessalonians 2:15, the Thessalonian church was instructed to “stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us.” Here, the Thessalonians were specifically commanded to hold to the traditions of the apostles, whether received by mouth or by letter (whether oral or written). The apostles are not here to tell us in person, by word of “mouth”, what to do. However, we do have their written directions. The overall context of 2 Thessalonians 2 refers to end-time events. But would it not also apply to church order?

Many believers feel that while apostolic tradition is interesting, following it is never commanded. But what does 2 Thessalonians 2:15 indicate? Is adherence to apostolic tradition

commanded or suggested? Significantly, it is clearly commanded. We are to follow the apostles, not just in their teaching and theology, but also in their practice.

A similar attitude is expressed in 2 Thessalonians 3:6-7a, "Keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the traditions you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example." The specific context here refers to gainful work versus being idle and lazy, yet the underlying principle holds true also. The apostles wanted the churches to follow their traditions.

Roger Williams, founder of Rhode Island and of the first Baptist church in the Americas (1600s), is another example of a Christian who believed that churches should strive for as near approximate as possible to New Testament forms and ordinances (*Liberty of Conscience*, p. 106). This belief led Williams to found Rhode Island on the New Testament pattern of a separation between church and state.

## **CONSISTENCY**

What can we conclude about God's interest in our own churches adhering to New Testament patterns for church practice? It seems evident that whatever was normative church practice for all the churches in the New Testament should be normative practice for churches today. I believe that it was precisely these patterns of church practice that gave the early church the dynamic that today's church has been missing for so long!

If the Bible directly commands something, then we obviously ought to follow that command. The fact is, the Bible commands adherence to the traditions of the apostles. The real question thus is not, "Do we have to do things the way they were done in the New Testament?" Rather, the question is: "Why would we want to do things any other way?!" If, however, the Bible is silent about something (i.e., there is neither command nor pattern to follow), then we have the freedom to do whatever suits us (following the leading of the Holy Spirit). Note carefully that we do not advocate a negative hermeneutic, insisting that if a practice is not found

in the Bible, then we can't do it. Rather, we promote a normative hermeneutic, insisting that we should hold to those practices that clearly were normative for the early church. Matters of silence are matters of freedom.

The Roman world is gone forever. There is a big difference between holding to apostolic tradition versus mindlessly copying everything seen in the New Testament (wearing sandals, writing on parchment, studying by oil lamps, wearing togas, etc.). The key is to focus in on New Testament church practice. Of course we must also beware of making patterns out of things that are not patterns in the New Testament. For instance, the Christian "communism" of Acts 4 was a one time event for a single church. It is an option for any believers of any age, but it is neither a command nor a New Testament pattern.

What are some apostolic traditions that should still be binding on the church today?

1. The Lord's Supper eaten as a full meal (1Co 11:17-34).
2. The Lord's Supper partaken of weekly (1Co 11:17-22).
3. The Lord's Supper eaten as the main reason for meeting each week (Ac 20:7, 1Co 11:33).
4. Interactive, participatory, open church meetings (1Co 14:26, 37).
5. Mutual edification, encouragement and fellowship as the goals of church meetings (Ac 2:42, 1Co 14:3-5, 12, 26, Heb 10:24-25).
6. Church government by consensus: elder-led rather than elder-ruled churches (Lk 22:24-27, 1Pe 5:1-4).
7. Locally trained leaders (2Ti 2:2).
8. Church eldership that is male, plural, non-hierarchical, homegrown, servant leadership (1Ti 3:1-7).
9. House churches: smaller congregations (Ro 16:5, Col 4:15, Phlm 2).
10. Meeting regularly on the Lord's Day (Mt 28:1-7, Ac 20:7, 1Co 16:1-4, Re 1:9-11).
11. The baptism of believers only (Mt 28:19-20).

12. The separation of church and state (Phlp 3:20).
13. A regenerate church body. (Mt 18:15-20).
14. Children present in the church meeting (Mt 19:13-15, Lk 2:41-50, Ac 21:5, Ep 6:1-3, Col 4:16)
15. A community based church: daily fellowship (Ac 2:42-47).
16. Church reproduction and equipping through the ministry of itinerant church workers such as apostles and evangelists (Ep 4:11-13).

What we argue for here is consistency. Most churches already follow some of these patterns, but not all. Again we wonder: why not? This consistency is especially important since the apostles expected for all churches to follow their traditions “just as” they were handed down. Are there ever justified exceptions to following New Testament patterns? London church elder Beresford Job comments, “We must make sure that we don't let biblically permitted deviations from the norm, done because of extenuating circumstances, actually become the norm. Let me illustrate this from baptism. Biblical baptism, like apostolic tradition for the way a church functions, is a command from the Lord. And although it's actual mode isn't anywhere commanded, we know from the way the early church did it (apostolic tradition again) that it was to be done upon conversion, with no time lapse, and in water. (The immersion bit I take for granted as that's what the actual word baptism means as a transliteration from the Greek *baptizo*.) Now we would be justly concerned at the notion that we are free to make changes to this, whether concerning who is to actually be baptized, it's mode, or indeed it's timing; and we are painfully aware it has been massacred in each of these ways by believers for far too long. So our position would be that, in order for it to be based on the teaching of the Word of God, a person should be baptized upon profession of faith in Jesus, as soon as possible, and by full immersion in water. But let us now address the scenario whereby a bedridden quadriplegic comes to the Lord. Baptism, as biblically commanded and exemplified in the New Testament for us, is clearly out of

the question in such an instance, yet it is quite clear too that to come up with another more appropriate mode of baptism for such a one would not only be okay, it would be positively incumbent upon us. And in such a circumstance one could technically be out of step with the teaching of scripture, yet be fully submitted to its intention and spirit. But here is the point: none of what I have just said could possibly apply to the conversion of an able bodied person - the normal mode would have to be employed in order for things to be as the Lord wants. And neither could anyone argue for the baptism of someone who hadn't responded to Jesus by faith, because that would attack the very nature of baptism, even though it's external mode was still in accordance with the scripture."

New Testament church life advocate Darryl Erkel has pointed out the "danger of making distinctive New Testament patterns a form of legalism wherein we begin to look down or distance ourselves from our fellow brothers because they don't quite do it the way that we think it should be done. We should always be careful to not give the impression to others that their church is false or that God can't use their church because they're not following Apostolic patterns as closely as we are. That is nothing but sheer pride. On the other hand, we ought to look for opportunities to respectfully and tactfully demonstrate that there is a better way — one which is more conducive to the spiritual growth of God's people — for the function of the New Testament church is best carried out by the New Testament form of the church!"

Remember the earlier quote by Professors Fee and Stuart that what is merely narrated or described can never function in a normative way? In the second edition of their book, they changed their statement somewhat. It now reads, "*Unless Scripture explicitly tells us we must do something, what is only narrated or described does not function in a normative way — unless it can be demonstrated on other grounds that the author intended it to function in this way*" (p. 106, second edition). I have attempted to demonstrate that the apostles did indeed design for churches to follow the patterns they laid down for church order. (These patterns are not to be derived from

the muddied waters of church history, but rather from the Scriptures alone.)

### **APOSTOLIC TEACHING AND HISTORIC THEOLOGY**

Amid so much emphasis on the importance of holding to apostolic *tradition*, as revealed on the New Testament, it is fitting to also emphasize the importance of devoting ourselves to apostolic *teaching*. The authors of this book advocate historic Christian orthodoxy poured into the wineskin of New Testament patterns for church life. In calling for a adoption of the ways of the apostles in our church practice, we are not suggesting that the theology of the historic church universal needs reforming. To this end, we believe that the essential doctrines of the historic Christian faith are correct. Jesus said that it was to our advantage that He went away, for in His place He sent His Holy Spirit to live in us and to guide us. Confidence in the Spirit's ability to teach and direct God's people make us conclude that on the essentials of theology, the church of history has gotten it right!

Faddish theological ideas will continue to sprout like weeds in a garden. Devilish doctrinal winds will always blow and toss the ungrounded to and fro. These challenges must be put into perspective. Which would you rather throw out the window, a recent novel theological position of very few people or the convictions of the universal Christian church of all ages? The choice is between the tried and proved faith of the collective body of Gods people, and the private judgement of a few individual objectors. We would broadly define heresy as anything which falls outside of the historic orthodox faith as upheld by the general consensus of the Christian Church for the last two millennia.

Since they are not inspired, it is acknowledged that the creeds and confessions of the historic church are liable to error. That this is so is obvious from the fact that they occasionally differ from one another. However, what should get our attention all the more is when the creeds and confessions *do* line up in agreement with each other at various points.

It is somewhat naive, and even arrogant, to think that a new corner has been discovered on

some “truth” that 99.999% of all others who have studied the Bible reject. We must cultivate a historical humility and a spirit of mutual submission with the church at large and with the church of ages past. When pastors and teachers, laymen, historians, catechists, and theologians all come to the same conclusion regarding a matter, that is significant.

Some, but not all, of the non-negotiable fundamentals of the faith are a belief in the Trinity — that God exists in the form of Father, Son and Holy Spirit; that forgiveness of sins is received by grace through faith in Jesus alone, as a free gift, because of what He accomplished for us on the cross through His substitutionary death; in the future bodily return of Jesus to earth; in the future tomb-emptying resurrection of the dead; and that the sixty-six books of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, comprise the inspired, inerrant and infallible Word of God, constituting our final authority in all matters, whether of doctrine, church practice, family life or personal holiness.

#### **SUMMARY/CLARIFICATION**

1. God directs by biblical pattern (tradition) as well as by biblical precept (teaching).
2. The patterns for church found in the New Testament are to be binding on the church in all ages and places.
3. Apostolic tradition (as found in the Bible) is equal in authority to apostolic teaching.
4. The bare essentials of New Testament life church are: a commitment to New Testament apostolic tradition, the celebration of the Lord’s Supper weekly as a full meal, interactive church meetings, church government by consensus (elder led, not elder ruled), and home-based (homesized) churches.
5. Without Christ at the center of things, these patterns become legalism and death, a hollow form, an empty shell. We need the proper wine skin, but more importantly we need the wine. Both have their place. Either one without the other is problematic.
6. Following New Testament patterns does not mean blindly attempting to recreate Roman

culture (like wearing togas, writing on parchment, lighting by oil lamps, etc.). The issue here is church practice. There should be obvious reasons behind the practices being followed.

7. Following New Testament patterns does not mean every church will be exactly alike.

Certainly there will be similarity in the basics (see summary # 4 above), but there is also freedom within the boundaries of the form.

8. Biblical house churches are not nearly so program and building oriented as many modern churches are. Because of this, some have mistakenly concluded that house churches are against organization. Faithfulness to our Lord and His Word necessarily results in a biblical house church that follows God's *complete* pattern for His church. We are not to be institutional, but we are to be organized. Following the traditions laid down by the apostles means that house churches are to have definite leaders, regular and orderly meetings, active church discipline, and weekly Lord's Supper celebrations.

9. Apostolic teaching is faithfully reflected in the essential doctrines of the historic orthodox faith as upheld by the general consensus of the Christian Church for the last two millennia.

Many churches today are firmly entrenched in historical traditions developed after the close of the apostolic era. Although sympathetic with apostolic tradition, the preference is usually given to more recently developed traditions. In such cases, is there not a danger of nullifying the inspired tradition of the apostles for the sake of more modern tradition (Mt 15)?

—Steve Atkerson

## **2**

### ***THE LORD'S SUPPER — FEAST OR FAMINE?***

The meal is potluck, or as we jokingly say, "pot-providence." Everyone brings food to share with everyone else. When the weather is nice, all the food is placed on a long folding table outside. A chest full of ice sits beside the drink table. Kids run wildly around. They are having so much fun that they must be rounded up by parents and encouraged to eat. After a prayer of

thanksgiving is offered, people line up, talking and laughing as they load their plates with food. In the middle of all the food sits a single loaf of bread next to a large plastic jug containing the fruit of the vine. Each believer partakes of the bread and juice while going through the serving line.

The smaller kids are encouraged to occupy one of the few places at a table to eat. (They sure can be messy!) Chairs for adults (there are not enough for everyone) are clustered in circles, mainly occupied by the women, who eat while discussing home schooling, child training, sewing, an upcoming church social, the new church we hope to start, etc. Most of the men stand to eat, balancing their plates on top of their cups, grouped into small clusters and solving the world's problems or pondering some interesting topic of theology. The atmosphere is not unlike that of a wedding banquet. It is a great time of fellowship, encouragement, edification, friendship, caring, catching-up, praying, exhorting, and maturing. The reason for the event? In case you did not recognize it, this is the Lord's Supper, New Testament style!

Foreign though it may seem to the contemporary church, the first-century church enjoyed the Lord's Supper as a banquet that foreshadowed the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. It was not until after the close of the New Testament era that the early church fathers altered the Lord's Supper from its pristine form.

### **ITS FORM AND FOCUS: A FEAST AND THE FUTURE**

The very first Lord's Supper is also called the Last Supper, because it was the last meal Jesus shared with his disciples before His crucifixion. The occasion for the meal was the Passover. At this Passover Feast, Jesus and His disciples reclined at a table that would have been heaped with food (Ex 12, De 16). Jewish tradition tells us that this meal typically lasted for hours. During the course of the meal, "*while* they were eating" (Mt 26:26), Jesus took a loaf bread and compared it to his body. He had *already* taken up a cup and had them all drink from it. Later, "*after* the supper" (Lk 22:20), Jesus took the cup again and compared it to his blood, which

was soon to be poured out for our sins. Thus, the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper were introduced in the context of a full meal, specifically, the Passover meal.

Would the Twelve have somehow concluded that the newly instituted Lord's Supper was *not* to be a true meal? Or would they naturally have assumed it to be a feast, just like the Passover?

The answers are obvious.

According to one Greek scholar, "The Passover celebrated two events, the deliverance from Egypt and the anticipated coming Messianic deliverance" (Reinecker, *Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, p. 207). Soon after that Last Supper, Jesus became the ultimate sacrificial Passover Lamb, suffering on the cross to deliver His people from their sins. Jesus keenly desired to eat that last Passover with His disciples, saying that He would "not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God" (Lk 22:16). Note that Jesus looked forward to a time when He could "eat" the Passover "again" in the kingdom of God. Evidently, the "fulfillment" (Lk 22:16) of this was later written about by John in Revelation 19:7-9. There, John recorded an angel declaring, "Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!" The Last Supper and the early church's Lord's Suppers all looked forward to a fulfillment in the wedding supper of the Lamb. *What better way to typify a banquet than with a banquet?*

His future wedding banquet was much on our Lord's mind that particular Passover evening. He mentioned it first at the beginning of the Passover feast (Lk 22:16). He mentioned it again when passing the cup, saying, "I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes" (Lk 22:18). Then, after the supper, He referred to it yet again, saying, "I confer on you a kingdom . . . so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom" (Lk 22:29-30).

Whereas modern Gentiles associate heaven with clouds and harps, first-century Jews thought of heaven as a time of feasting at Messiah's table. This idea of eating and drinking at the Messiah's table was common imagery in Jewish thought of the first century. For instance, a Jewish leader once said to Jesus, "Blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of

God" (Lk 14:15). Jesus Himself said that "many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 8:11). This eating that is associated with the coming of Christ's kingdom is even seen in the model prayer of Matthew 6:9-11. In reference to His coming kingdom, Jesus taught us to pray, "your kingdom come, your will be done." The very next sentence is "Give us today our daily bread." The Greek underlying Matthew 6:11 is difficult to translate. Literally, it reads something closer to, "the bread of us belonging to the coming day give us today." Linking 6:11 with 6:10, Jesus may well have been teaching us to ask that the bread of the Messianic (kingdom come) banquet be given to us today. That is, let the kingdom come and the feast begin today!

The most extensive treatment of the Lord's Supper is found in chapters ten and eleven of 1 Corinthians. The deep divisions of the Corinthian believers resulted in their Lord's Supper meetings doing more harm than good (11:17-18). They were partaking of the Supper in a "unworthy manner" (11:27). The wealthier people among them, perhaps not wanting to eat with the lower social classes, evidently came to the gathering so early and remained there so long that some became drunk. Making matters worse, by the time that the working-class believers arrived, delayed by employment constraints, all the food had been consumed and they went home hungry (11:21-22). Some of the Corinthians failed to recognize the Supper as a sacred, covenant meal (11:23-32).

The abuses were so serious that what was supposed to be the Lord's Supper and had instead become their *own* supper (11:21, NASV). Thus Paul asked, "Don't you have homes to eat and drink in?" If eating their own supper was the entire objective, private dining at home would do. Their sinful selfishness absolutely betrayed the very essence of what the Lord's Supper is all about.

From the nature of their abuse, it is evident that the Corinthian church regularly partook of the Lord's Supper as a full meal. In contrast, very few people in modern churches would ever

come to a typical Lord's Supper service expecting to have physical hunger satisfied. Nor could they possibly get drunk from drinking a thimble-sized cup of wine (or much less, grape juice). The inspired solution for the Corinthian's abuse of the Supper was not that the church cease eating it as a full meal. Instead, Paul wrote, "when you come together to eat, wait for each other." Only those so famished or undisciplined or selfish that they could not wait for the others are instructed to "eat at home" (1Co 11:34). Keep in mind that Paul wrote to the Corinthian church some twenty years after Jesus turned His Last Supper into our Lord's Supper. Just as the Last Supper was a full meal, so too the Corinthians understood the Lord's Supper to be a true meal. Additionally, the word behind "supper" (1Co 11:20) is *deipnon*, which means "dinner, the main meal toward evening, banquet." It never refers to anything less than a full meal, such as an appetizer, snack or *hors d'oeuvres*. What is the possibility that the authors of the New Testament would use *deipnon* to refer to the Lord's "Supper" if it were not supposed to be a full meal? The Lord's Supper originally had numerous forward looking aspects to it. As a full meal, it prefigured the feast of the coming kingdom, the marriage supper of the Lamb.

The opinion of most Bible scholars is clearly weighted toward the conclusion that the Lord's Supper was originally eaten as a full meal. For example, Donald Guthrie, in *The Lion Handbook of the Bible*, states that "in the early days the Lord's Supper took place in the course of a communal meal. All brought what food they could and it was shared together."

Dr John Drane, in *The New Lion Encyclopedia*, commented that "Jesus instituted this common meal at Passover time, at the last supper shared with His disciples before His death . . . the Lord's Supper looks back to the death of Jesus, and it looks forward to the time when He will come back again. Throughout the New Testament period the Lord's Supper was an actual meal shared in the homes of Christians. It was only much later that the Lord's Supper was moved to a special building and Christian prayers and praises that had developed from the synagogue services and other sources were added to create a grand ceremony."

J. G. Simpson, in an entry about the Eucharist in *The Dictionary of the Bible*, observed that “the name Lord’s Supper, though legitimately derived from 1 Corinthians 11:20, is not there applied to the sacrament itself, but to the Love Feast or Agape, a meal commemorating the Last Supper, and not yet separated from the Eucharist when St. Paul wrote.”

Canon Leon Morris, in his *Commentary on 1 Corinthians* for the *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* insists that 1Co 11 “reveals that at Corinth the Holy Communion was not simply a token meal as with us, but an actual meal. Moreover it seems clear that it was a meal to which each of the participants brought food.”

Howard Marshall, in *Christian Beliefs* noted that the Lord’s Supper “was observed by His disciples, at first as part of a communal meal, Sunday by Sunday.”

#### **ITS FUNCTIONS: 1.) REMINDING JESUS**

Partaking of the bread and cup as an integral part of the meal originally served several important functions. One of these was to remind Jesus of His promise to return. “Reminding” God of His covenant promises is a thoroughly Scriptural concept. In the covenant God made with Noah, He promised never to destroy the earth by flood again, signified by the rainbow. That sign is certainly designed to remind *us* of God’s promise, but God also declared, “whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, *I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant* between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth” (Ge 9:16, emphasis added ).

Later on in redemptive history, as a part of His covenant with Abraham, God promised to bring the Israelites out of their coming Egyptian bondage. Accordingly, at the appointed time, “God heard their groaning and *He remembered his covenant* with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them” (Ex 2:24-25, emphasis added).

During the Babylonian captivity, Ezekiel records that God promised Jerusalem, “*I will remember the covenant* I made with you” (Eze 16:60, emphasis added).

The Lord's Supper is the sign of the *new* covenant. As Jesus took the cup He said, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Mt 26:28). As with any sign, it is to serve as a reminder. Thus Jesus said that we are to partake of the bread "in remembrance of" Him (Lk 22:19). The Greek word translated "remembrance" is *anamnesis* and means "reminder." Literally translated, Jesus said, "do this unto my reminder."

The question before us is whether that reminder is to be primarily for Jesus' benefit or ours.

The prepositional phrase "of me" (or "my") is translated from the single Greek word, *emos*, which grammatically denotes possession (i.e., the reminder belongs to Jesus). Thus, the church was to partake of the bread of the Lord's Supper specifically to remind Jesus of His promise to return and eat the Supper again, in person (Lk 22:16, 18). Understood in this light, it was originally designed to be like a prayer asking Jesus to return ("Thy kingdom come," Mt 6:11).

Just as the rainbow reminds God of His covenant with Noah, just like the groaning reminded God of His covenant with Abraham, so too partaking of the bread of the Lord's Supper was designed to remind Jesus of His promise to return. Colin Brown quotes J. Jeremias as understanding Jesus to use *anamnesis* in the sense of a reminder for God, "The Lord's Supper would thus be an enacted prayer" (*New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, III, p. 244).

Paul, in 1 Corinthians 11:26, confirms this idea by stating that the early church, in eating the Lord's Supper, did actually "proclaim the Lord's death until He comes." To whom did they proclaim His death, and why? Arguably, they proclaimed it to the Lord Himself, as a reminder for Him to return. It is significant that the Greek behind "until" is *achri hou*. As it is used here, it grammatically can denote a goal or an objective (Reinecker, *Linguistic Key To The Greek NT*, p. 34). According to the English usage, I may use an umbrella "until" it stops raining, merely denoting a time frame. (Using the umbrella has nothing to do with making it stop raining.)

However, this is not how the Greek behind "until" is used in 1 Corinthians 11:26. Instead, Paul was instructing the church to partake of the bread and cup as a means of proclaiming the Lord's

death (as a reminder) with the goal of (“until”) persuading Him to come back! Thus, in proclaiming His death through the loaf and cup, the Supper looked forward to and anticipated His return.

This concept of seeking to persuade the Lord to return is not unlike the plea of the martyrs of Revelation 6 who called out, “How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?” (Re 6:10). And what did Peter have in mind when he wrote that his readers should look forward to the day of God and “speed its coming?” (2Pe 3:12). If it was futile to seek to persuade Jesus to return, then why did Jesus instruct his disciples to pray, “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done?” (Mt 6:10).

### **ITS FUNCTIONS: 2.) CREATING UNITY**

All this emphasis on the Supper as a true meal is not to say that we should jettison the loaf and cup, representative of the body and blood of our Lord. To the contrary, they remain a vital part of the Supper (1Co 11:23-26).

Just as the form of the Lord’s Supper is important (a full fellowship meal that prefigured the wedding banquet of the Lamb), also important are the form of the bread and cup. Paul made mention of “the” (that is, singular) cup of thanksgiving and of the “one [singular] loaf” (1Co 10:16-17). Paul explains the significance of using one cup and one loaf in the Supper: “Because there is one loaf, we who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf” (1Co 10:16-17). The one loaf not only pictures our unity in Christ, but according to 1Corinthians 10:17 even *creates* unity! Notice carefully the wording of the inspired text. “Because” there is one loaf, therefore we are one body, “for” we all partake of the one loaf (1Co 10:17). Partaking of a pile of broken cracker crumbs and multiple cups of juice is a picture of disunity, division, and individuality. At the very least, it completely misses the imagery of unity. At worse, it would prohibit the Lord from using the one loaf to create unity in a body of believers.

### **ITS FUNCTIONS: 3.) FELLOWSHIP**

In speaking to the church at Laodicea, our resurrected Lord offered to come in and “eat” (*deipneo*) with anyone who heard His voice and opened the door, a picture of fellowship and communion (Re 3:20). The idea that fellowship and acceptance is epitomized by eating together was derived not only from the Hebrew culture of Jesus’ day, but also from the earliest Hebrew Scriptures. Exodus 18:12 reveals that Jethro, Moses, Aaron, and all the elders of Israel came to “eat bread” in the “presence of God.” More divine dining occurred at the cutting of the Sinai covenant, when Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu and the seventy elders of Israel when up on Mount Sinai where they “saw God, and they ate and drank” (Ex 24:9-11). It is significant that “God did not raise his hand against these leaders” (Ex 24:11a). They were accepted by Him, as evidenced in the holy meal they ate in His presence.

This “fellowship in feasting” theme is continued on in the book of Acts, where we learn that the early church devoted themselves to “fellowship in the breaking of bread” (2:42, literal translation). In your English version, notice that in Acts 2:42 there is an “and” between “teaching” and “fellowship,” and between “bread” and “prayer,” but not between “fellowship” and “bread.” In the actual Greek, the words “fellowship” and “breaking of bread” are linked together as simultaneous activities. They had fellowship with one another *as* they broke bread together. Luke further informs us that this eating was done with “glad and sincere hearts” (2:46). Sounds inviting, doesn’t it? Many commentaries associate the phrase “breaking of bread” throughout the books of Acts with the Lord’s Supper. This is because Luke, who wrote Acts, recorded in his gospel that Jesus took bread and “broke it” at the last supper (22:19). If this conclusion is accurate, then early church enjoyed the Lord’s Supper as a time of fellowship and gladness, just like one would enjoy at a wedding banquet.

#### **ITS FREQUENCY: WEEKLY**

How often did the New Testament church partake of the Supper? Early believers ate the Lord’s Supper weekly, and it was the main purpose for their coming together each Lord’s Day.

The first evidence for this is grammatical. The technical term, "Lord's Day" is from a unique phrase in the Greek, *kuriakon hemeran*, which literally reads, "the day belonging to the Lord." The words "belonging to the Lord" are from *kuriakos*, which occurs in the New Testament only in Revelation 1:10 and in 1 Corinthians 11:20, where Paul uses it to refer to the "Lord's Supper" or the "Supper belonging to the Lord" (*kuriakon deipnon*). The connection between these two uses must not be missed! If the purpose of the weekly church meeting is to observe the Lord's Supper, it only makes sense that this *supper* belonging to the Lord would be eaten on the *day* belonging to the Lord (the first day of the week). John's revelation (Re 1:10) evidently thus occurred on the first day of the week, the day in which Jesus rose from the dead and the day on which the early church met to eat the Supper belonging to the Lord. The resurrection and the day and the supper all go together as a package deal!

Second, the only reason ever given in the New Testament for the regular purpose of a church meeting is to eat the Lord's Supper. In Acts 20:7, Luke informs us that, "On the first day of the week we came together to break bread." The words "to eat" in Ac 20:7 reflect what is known as a telic infinitive. It denotes a purpose or objective. Their meeting was a meeting!

Another place in the New Testament that the purpose for a church gathering is stated is found in 1 Corinthians 11:17-22. Their "meetings" (11:17) were doing more harm than good because when they came "together as a church" (11:18a) they had divisions so deep that Paul wrote, "when you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat" (11:18b). From this is it obvious that the primary reason for their church meetings was to eat the Lord's Supper. Sadly, their abuses of the Supper were so gross that it had ceased being the Lord's Supper, but officially they were gathering each week to celebrate the Supper.

The third and last location of a reference to the reason for an assembly is found in 1 Corinthians 11:33, "When you come together to eat, wait for each other." As before, it shows that the reason they came together was to "eat." Lest this appear to be making a mountain out of

a mole hill, it must be realized that no other reason is ever given in the Scriptures as to the purpose of a regular, weekly church meeting.

The fellowship and encouragement that each member enjoys in such a gathering is tremendous. It is the Christian equivalent of the neighborhood bar. It is the true happy meal or happy hour. It is a time that God uses to create unity in a body of believers. This aspect of the church's meeting should not be rushed or replaced. Certainly it is appropriate to also have a "1 Corinthians 14 phase" of the gathering (an interactive time of teaching, worship, singing, testimony, prayer, etc.), but not at the expense of the weekly Lord's Supper.

### **PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Practicing the Lord's Supper as a full meal today is can be a means of great blessing to the church. Here are some practical considerations concerning how to of implementing it.

**Attitude:** Be sure the church understands that the Lord's Supper is the main purpose for the weekly gathering. It is neither optional nor secondary to some type of "worship service". Even if all a church does on a given Sunday is celebrate the Lord's Supper, it has fulfilled one of its primary reasons for having a meeting that week.

**Food:** If at all possible, make the meal one that is shared and purpose to eat whatever is brought. This makes the administration of the food much easier. Trust God's sovereignty! Overplanning the meal can take a lot of the fun out and make it burdensome. The one thing that should be pre-planned is who supplies the one loaf and the fruit of the vine. (In our church, the family that is hosting the meeting always supplies these things.)

**Giving:** Since celebrating the meal is a New Testament pattern and something important to the life of a properly functioning church, time and money spent by individual families on food to bring is truly a part of their giving unto the Lord. Rather than merely dropping an offering in a plate each week, go to the food store and buy the best food you can afford. Bring it to the Supper as a sacrificial offering!

**Clean Up:** To facilitate clean up, you may want to consider using paper plates and napkins along with plastic forks and cups. Also, since folks sometimes carelessly throw away their utensils along with the rest of their trash, it is better to accidentally throw away a plastic fork than a metal one! To help avoid spills the host family supplies wicker plate holders, which can be reused and don't usually need to be washed.

**Logistics:** In warm weather it may be appropriate to eat outside. Spilled food and drink is inevitable, and clean up is much easier. A large folding table can be placed where necessary and stored away after the meeting. In cold weather, when eating indoors is necessary, consider covering any nicely upholstered furniture with a layer of plastic and then cloth. Since children make the most mess, reserve any available seating at a table for them and insist they use it!

**The Cup and Loaf:** Some have found that taking the cup and loaf prior to the meal separates it from the meal too much as a separate act. It is as if the Lord's Supper is the cup and loaf, and everything else is just lunch. To overcome this false dichotomy, try placing the cup and loaf on the table with the rest of the food of the Lord's Supper. The cup and loaf can be pointed out in advance of the meeting and mentioned in the prayer prior to the meal, but then placed on the buffet table with everything else. This way, believers can partake of it as they pass through the serving line.

Should the loaf be unleavened and the fruit of the vine alcoholic? The Jews ate unleavened bread in the Passover meal to symbolize the quickness with which God brought them out of Egypt. Jesus used unleavened bread in the original Last Supper. Nothing is said in the New Testament, however, about Gentile churches using unleavened bread in the Lord's Supper. Though sometimes in the New Testament yeast is associated with evil (1Co 5:6-8), it is also used to represent God's kingdom (Mt 13:33)! As we see it, this is a matter of freedom. Regarding wine, it is clear from 1 Corinthians 11 that wine was used in the Lord's Supper, because some had become drunk. No clear theological reason is ever given in Scripture, however, for so doing (but

consider Ge 27:28, Isa 25:6-9, Ro 14:21). As with the unleavened bread, it would seem to be a matter of freedom for each church to decide.

**Unbelievers:** Should unbelievers be allowed to partake of the Lord's Supper? The Lord's Supper, as a sacred, covenant meal, has significance only to believers. To nonbelievers, it is merely food for the belly! It is clear from 1 Corinthians 14:23-25 that unbelievers will occasionally attend church meetings. Unbelievers get hungry just like believers do, so invite them to eat too. Love them to Jesus! The danger in taking the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner applies only to believers (1Co 11:27-32).

Regarding the one cup and loaf, if an unbelieving child desires to drink the grape juice just because he likes grape juice, that is fine. However, if the parents purposely give it to an unbelieving child as a religious act, then that might be a violation of what the Lord's Supper is all about. It would be closely akin to the concept of infant baptism.

**Ordained Clergy:** Some believe that only an ordained clergyman can officiate at the Lord's table. The New Testament makes no such requirement. Indeed, the very concept of a special class of clergy is totally absent from Scripture and goes directly against apostolic tradition. There clearly are to be leaders in the church (such as elders) but they are not to be classified as clergy versus laity.

## **CONCLUSION**

Now that the New Testament form of the Supper has been duly established, the next question facing believers today concerns our Lord's intent for modern churches. Does Jesus desire for His people to celebrate the Lord's Supper in the same way it was eaten in the New Testament? Or could it be a matter of indifference to Him? Do we have the freedom to deviate from the Supper's original form as a true banquet? Certainly not. Why would anyone want to depart from the way Christ and His apostles practiced the Lord's Supper? The apostles clearly were pleased when churches held to their traditions (1Co 11:2) and even commanded that they do

so (2Th 2:15). We have no authorization to deviate from it.

In summary, the Lord's Supper is the primary purpose for which the church is to gather each Lord's Day. Eaten as a full meal, the Supper typifies the wedding supper of the Lamb and is thus forward-looking. It is to be partaken of as a feast, in a joyful, wedding atmosphere rather than in a somber, funeral atmosphere. A major benefit of the Supper as a banquet is the fellowship and encouragement each member experiences. Within the context of this full meal, there is to be one cup and one loaf from which all partake. These are symbolic of Jesus' body and blood and serve to remind Jesus of His promise to return. The one loaf is to be used, not only to symbolize the unity of a body of believers, but also because God will use it to create unity within a body of believers.

— Steve Atkerson

### **3**

#### ***INTERACTIVE MEETINGS***

The first song begins promptly at 10:30 Sunday morning. Prior to that, folks are hugging and greeting each other, bringing food or children inside the house, getting a cup of coffee from the kitchen, or standing around talking. That first song is the cue for everyone to assemble in the living room so that the more formal time of the meeting can begin. There are usually about ten families and two singles present. Counting children, there are around fifty people. Some are usually late in arriving. There are typically enough chairs for the adults, and the children sit on the floor near their parents. Young children color or play quietly with toys during the entire meeting. People are dressed casually and comfortably.

The musicians (two tenor banjos, one guitar and one mandolin) do not try to be "worship leaders." Their goal is simply to facilitate and support the group's singing. As many or as few songs are sung as are requested by those present. Spontaneous prayer is often offered between songs, sometimes leading to longer times of conversational prayer. There is no bulletin or order

of service, though everything is done in a fitting and orderly way. Only one person at a time may speak. The “prime directive” is that anything said or done must be designed to build up, edify, encourage or strengthen the whole church.

Sometimes several brothers teach. Some weeks no one brings a word of instruction.

Certainly those burdened to instruct do prepare prior to the meeting, but rarely is anyone officially scheduled to do so. Interspersed between the songs and teachings, testimonies are shared of God’s provision, of lessons learned, of prayers answered, of encouraging events, etc. Frequently a visiting Christian worker will report on his ministry and God’s work in other places. It is not a show or performance. There is neither moderator nor emcee. Unless there is a problem to resolve, a visitor would not even know who the leaders are. Sometimes there are periods of silence. There is not an official ending time for the meeting. Often it lasts one and a half to two hours. Either everyone who desires to sing or speak has done so, or the kids are at the end of their endurance, or corporate hunger motivates a conclusion. Generally, the meeting closes with prayer. Afterwards, folks stay and fellowship as long as they desire. The meeting usually transitions into the Lord’s Supper, a full meal that everyone enjoys.

The church meeting described above is not fictional. Such meetings take place every Lord’s Day, all over the world. They even occur in such unlikely places as England, America, Canada, Australia and New Zealand! They are modeled after the church meetings described in the New Testament. Modern believers are often so accustomed to holding church in special sanctuaries with stained glass, steeples, pipe organs, pews, pulpits, choirs, bulletins, and worship leaders that it is assumed Scripture dictates such trappings. The reality is that New Testament church meetings were vastly different from what typically practiced today.

### **SCRIPTURAL ARGUMENTS FOR INTERACTIVE MEETINGS**

Interactive meetings are indeed Scriptural. For example, Paul asked the Corinthians, “What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of

instruction, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church” (1Co 14:26).

Had Scripture used the words “only one” instead of “everyone,” the verse would be more descriptive of most modern church services. It is clear from the text, however, that those original church meetings were much different. There was interaction, spontaneity and participation. In a sense there really wasn’t an audience because all the brothers were potential “cast members.”

The spontaneous and interactive nature of early church meetings is also evident in the regulations concerning those who spoke in tongues: “If anyone speaks in a tongue, two - or at the most three, should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret. If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and God” (1Co 14: 27-28).

Were these speakers in unknown tongues scheduled in advance to speak? Not likely, given the supernatural nature of the gift. That the meetings were interactive is evident from the fact that up to three people could speak in tongues and that there was the need for an interpreter to be present.

Further indication of the participatory nature of their gatherings is seen in the guidelines given for prophets in 1 Corinthians 14:29-32. We are informed that “Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said” (14:29). The spontaneous nature of their participation also comes out in 14:30-31a, “If a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop. For you can all prophesy in turn”. Clearly, some of the prophets came to church not planning to say anything, but then received a revelation while sitting there and listening.

Perhaps one of the most controversial paragraphs in the New Testament occurs in 1 Corinthians 14:33b-35, regarding the silence of women in the meeting. However one interprets this passage, there would have been no need for Paul to have written it unless first century church meetings were participatory. It is implied from 14:35 that people were asking questions of the

speakers during the church meetings: “If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home”. Even if Paul only meant that women were not to be the ones doing the questioning, it still remained that the men were free to quiz a speaker. The point to be gleaned is that a church meeting is not supposed to be a one way communication. There is to be dialog, interaction among those who gather.

Almost every New Testament letter is an “occasional document,” so-called because it was written in response to some local problem. Evidently some in Corinth wanted to conduct their meetings differently than this passage requires. Clearly, some aspect of the church meetings in Corinth was amiss. This much is obvious from the nature of the two questions asked of them: “Did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached?” (1Co 14:36).

The word of God certainly had not originated with the Corinthians, and they most certainly were not the only people it had reached. These questions were thus designed to convince the Corinthian believers that they had neither right nor authorization to conduct their meetings in any other way than what is prescribed in 1 Corinthians 14. The inspired correction served to regulate orderly interaction at church gatherings, not a prohibit it. Paul wrote, “Be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way” (14:39-40).

Holding church meetings in this spontaneous, interactive manner is in fact declared to be imperative according to 1 Corinthians 14:37, “If anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord’s command.”. Thus, 1 Corinthians 14 is not merely *descriptive* of primitive church meetings. Rather, it is *prescriptive* of the way our Lord expects meetings of the whole church to be conducted.

When we understand the historical context of the early Christians, it is not surprising that the meetings of the first-century church would have been interactive. The first believers in most

areas of the Roman Empire were Jewish. They were accustomed to gathering in the typical synagogue format, which was open to participation from those in attendance. An examination of Acts 13:14-15, 14:1, 17:1-2, 17:10, 18:4 and 19:8 will reveal that the apostles could never have evangelized the way they did unless the synagogues allowed input from those in the “audience.” The apostles were always permitted to speak in the open meetings of the synagogue. In fact, if those first century synagogue meetings were anything like most typical twenty-first century church worship services, Paul and his companions would have had to find another way to reach the Jews with the gospel!

There are other biblical indicators as well. In Acts 20:7, we discover that Paul “kept on talking” (“preached,” KJV) to the church at Troas until midnight. The Greek word translated “talking” is *dialegomia* which literally means “consider and discuss, argue.” Our English word “dialogue” is derived from it today. That meeting in Troas was interactive.

There is still more. The author of Hebrews urged his readers to “not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another” (10:25). Early believers encouraged one another when they gathered. That encouragement, of course, required interaction. Additionally, believers are instructed in Hebrews 10:24 to meeting in order to stimulate each other to love and good deeds. This too required interaction.

The over-arching purpose for anything done in a church gathering was, according to Paul, for the “strengthening of the church” (14:26). The Greek word used here is *oikodome*, which means “building up” or “edification” (NASV). Thayer pointed out in his lexicon that it is the action of one who promotes another’s growth in Christianity. Thus, any words spoken in a church meeting should be calculated to encourage, build up, strengthen or edify the other believers present.

In keeping with this, Paul encouraged prophecy over the public speaking in tongues because everyone who prophesied in a church meeting spoke to others for their “strengthening,

encouragement and comfort” (1Co 14:3) with the result that the church was “edified” (14:5). The Corinthians were instructed to “try to excel in gifts that build up the church” (14:12). All of this points to the interactive nature of early church gatherings.

One final observation: today’s church gatherings are commonly referred to as “worship services.” This title suggests that the reason for regular Christian gatherings is to worship God. Yet the New Testament never refers to a church meeting as a “worship service.” As we have already seen, Scripture indicates that the early church gathered primarily for the purpose of mutual edification and strengthening.

Don’t misunderstand me. Corporate worship can certainly contribute to the strengthening of the church. Worship, however, is not the only activity that can edify. The problem lies partially in naming the meeting a “worship service.” First, church meetings are to be interactive, not a “service.” Second, such a title suggests that worship is the only appropriate activity that is to occur. Other modes of edification are seen as less important. People are led to expect emotional feelings such as are associated with cathedral architecture, candles, hushed sanctuaries, stained glass, awe-inspiring music, and the presentation of a program that is in essence a performance. With such unbiblical expectations, a truly biblical 1 Corinthians 14 meeting will seem strange, uncomfortable, or even disconcerting.

So where does worship fit? Jesus told the woman at the well, “A time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem” (Jn 4:21-24). In saying this, He made it clear that the new covenant worship would have nothing to do with any particular location. It transcends 11:00 a.m. on a Sunday morning and should not be localized in any church “sanctuary.”

There are primarily two Greek words in the New Testament for “worship.” The first is *proskuneo* and refers to an attitude of adoring awe toward God. It is humility toward the Father. It is reverence, appreciation, fear and wonder.

This attitude of inner devotion is very practically worked out in the second New Testament word for worship (*latreia*), which refers to a life-style of obedience and service. Worship is thus *both* an attitude and an action. As Francis Scott Key penned in a hymn: “And since words can never measure, let my life show forth Thy praise.” Thus, while our participation in the weekly church meeting is undeniably an act of worship, so is going to work honestly, discipling our children, loving our families, etc. Our daily lives are to be a continual act of worship.

The Sunday gathering is for the benefit of the people present. It is not God who needs strengthening because He is not weak. The Lord doesn’t need to be encouraged since He is neither tired nor discouraged. Jesus is not lacking in anything, but His people certainly are. Thus the primary purpose of a church meeting is to equip God’s people to go out to worship and serve Him another week (Heb 10:24-25). It is to motivate the elect to deeper worship and obedience.

#### **LOGICAL ARGUMENTS FOR INTERACTIVE MEETINGS**

It is a simple fact of history that the early church met in the homes of its members. No special church buildings were constructed during the New Testament era, nor during the following two hundred years. This necessarily meant that their gatherings were smaller rather than larger. Such smaller settings would have essentially eliminated the possibility that those pristine meetings might consist of an eloquent sermon delivered to a massed crowd of hushed listeners.

After Christianity was made the official religion of the Roman Empire, pagan temples were turned by government decree into church buildings. Believers were herded out of their home meetings and into large basilicas. Such huge gatherings naturally were more of a show or “service.” Interactive teaching became nonexistent, and instruction was monologue oration. Questions from the “audience” were not allowed. Spontaneity was lost. The “one another” aspect of an assembly became impossible. Informality gave way to formality. Church leaders began to wear special costumes. Worship aids were introduced: incense, icons, hand gestures,

etc. It continues even today, to a lesser or greater degree. In short, the New Testament way was jettisoned for a way of man's own devising.

Which type of church meeting best meets the needs of God's people? Certainly much good comes from the weekly proclamation of God's Word by those church leaders who have come to be known as "preachers." The worshipful and inspirational singing of the great hymns of the Faith is also beneficial. Yet scripturally, there is supposed to be more to a church meeting than merely "attending" a "service."

To allow any of the brothers who so desire to verbally participate in the meeting lends for a greater working of the Spirit as the various ministry gifts begin to function. Not allowing them to function causes atrophy, and even apathy. According to what Paul wrote, God may burden several brothers, independent of each other, to bring a teaching. Learning is increased as questions are asked of a speaker. Additional applications and illustrations can be offered to a word of instruction by the body at large. False doctrines can be judged and exposed publicly at the point of presentation. New believers learn how to think biblically with the mind of Christ as more mature believers are observed reasoning together. Maturity rates skyrocket. The brothers begin to "own" the meeting, taking responsibility for what goes on, and becoming active participators rather than passive spectators.

#### **SCHOLARLY TESTIMONY FOR INTERACTIVE MEETINGS**

That New Testament church gatherings were completely open and participatory with no one leading from the front is agreed upon by researchers. For instance, Dr. Henry Sefton, in *A Lion Handbook - The History of Christianity*, stated, "Worship in the house-church had been of an intimate kind in which all present had taken an active part . . . (this) changed from being 'a corporate action of the whole church' into 'a service said by the clergy to which the laity listened'" (p. 51).

Dr. John Drane, in *Introducing the New Testament*, wrote that "In the earliest days . . . their

worship was spontaneous. This seems to have been regarded as the ideal, for when Paul describes how a church meeting should proceed he depicts a Spirit-led participation by many, if not all . . . There was the fact that anyone had the freedom to participate in such worship. In the ideal situation, when everyone was inspired by the Holy Spirit, this was the perfect expression of Christian freedom” (p. 42).

A. M. Renwick, writing in *The Story of the Church*, said that “The very essence of church organization and Christian life and worship . . . was simplicity . . . Their worship was free and spontaneous under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and had not yet become inflexible through the use of manuals of devotion” (p. 22-23).

### **PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

One aspect of New Testament meetings that is still practiced today is the singing. The Ephesian church was instructed to “speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart of the Lord” (Ep 5:19). Similarly, the Colossians were exhorted to “let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God” (Col 3:16). Perhaps not so familiar to modern believers, however, is the “one another” (Ep 5:19, Col 3:16) emphasis of the singing. According to 1 Corinthians 14:26, “everyone” of the brothers had the opportunity to bring a “hymn.” No mention is made anywhere in the New Testament of a minister of music or worship leader controlling the singing. It is certainly a blessing to have gifted musicians in a congregation who can assist the church in worship and singing. However, to be true to the New Testament prescription, musicians must be careful not to perform like those on stage in a show. The brothers of the church must be given the freedom and responsibility of requesting what songs are sung, and when.

On a related note (pun intended!), some Christians are adamantly against the use of musical instruments in church meetings. However, the Greek word for “hymn” (1Co 14:26) is translated

from *psalmos* and which fundamentally means, “songs accompanied by a stringed instrument”. Since instruments are not forbidden, and since there is no known pattern of specifically not using them, we feel that this is an issue where each church has liberty to determine its own practice. Another feature of early church meetings that is still practiced today is the teaching of God’s Word. Our Lord instructed the apostles to make disciples of all nations, “teaching” (Mt 28:20) them to obey everything He had commanded. Accordingly, we learn from Acts 2:42 that the Jerusalem church devoted themselves to the apostles’ “teaching.” Further, “teaching” is listed as a spiritual gift in Romans 12:7 and 1 Corinthians 12:28. Moreover, one of the requirements of an elder is that he be “able to teach” (1Ti 3:2). Elders who work hard at “teaching” (1Ti 5:17-18) are worthy of “double honor” (financial support).

In 1 Corinthians 14, however, teaching is tossed in with the other activities in an almost cavalier way. The teacher is not given the prominence that one sees in today’s typical church meeting. “Everyone” of the “brothers” was to be given the opportunity to contribute a “word of instruction” (14:26).

All this together demands of us an appreciation for the importance of those called to teaching ministries, yet we should also allow for any brother who is led to be given the opportunity to teach in our regular 1 Corinthians 14-type gatherings. Practically, it would also suggest each teaching during the 1 Corinthians 14 style of meeting be shorter rather than a longer in order to allow the opportunity for others who might desire to teach.

Amazingly, pastors/elders are not even mentioned in 1 Corinthians 14. This may be because pastors did not dominate these types of gatherings with their teachings. This is not to say that elders did not teach in the meetings, but it is clear from 1 Corinthians 14 that non-elders also had the opportunity to do so. Thus, the author of Hebrews made the general statement that “by this time you ought to be teachers” (Heb 5:12). That he did not have the leaders in mind is evident from his salutation (“greet all your leaders,” 13:24), revealing that he did not even expect the

elders to read the letter! Still, just because the opportunity *exists* for someone to teach, it does not necessarily follow that they *should* teach. The elders must remind the church of James' warning that "not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly" (Jam 3:1). James' caution makes sense in light of the intimate, interactive meetings that characterized the early church.

This freedom for any brother to teach is precisely when the elders are needed most. If a brother brings an erroneous teaching or application, the elders can gently correct the error.

Timothy, an apostolic worker stationed temporarily at Ephesus, was to "command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer" (1Ti 1:3). Scripture also tells us that one qualification for an elder is that he must "hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it" (Tit 1:9). Similarly, Titus was told to "encourage and rebuke with all authority. Do not let anyone despise you" (Tit 2:15). The aged apostle John warned about a known deceiver: "do not take him into your house." (One can easily see how John's instructions could have been applied to house churches with participatory meetings.)

It is obvious that some brothers are far more qualified to teach than are others. An aged, godly man, gifted to teach, who loves the Lord, and who has studied the Bible and served people all his life, is going to have profound insights to share with the church. Especially in the presence of such men, the rest of us should be "quick to listen, slow to speak" (Jam 1:19). Special times should be devoted to allow such a man the opportunity of expounding God's Word. However, such meetings are what Watchman Nee called worker's meetings or apostolic meetings, not 1 Corinthians 14 church meetings. The point is that there is a time and a place for both.

Charismatic and Pentecostal churches are quite familiar with revelations, tongues, and interpretations. Churches that practice such gifts should be sure the guidelines of 1 Corinthians 14:26-32 are followed closely. Un-interpreted tongues are not to be allowed. There is to be a

limit on the number of those who do speak in tongues. Only one person at a time should speak. Prophecies must be judged, and anyone who desires to prophesy needs to realize in advance that his words will be weighed carefully. Doubtless much that passes for prophecy and tongues is bogus. Dealing with this area can be messy and frustrating since overly-emotional and unstable folks often imagine they have such gifts. Perhaps that is why the Thessalonians had to be told, “do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil” (1Th 5:20-22). And, in the midst of all these supernatural utterances, there must be order: “The spirits of the prophets are subject to the control of the prophets. God is not a God of disorder but of peace” (1Co 14:33a). Elders play a key role in helping everything that goes on in the meeting to be done in a “fitting and orderly way” (1Co 14:40).

Some churches believe that charismatic gifts ended in the first century, or have no one present who is so gifted. Even so, the principle of participatory meetings remains. Brothers should still be free to spontaneously bring teachings, request or introduce songs, share testimonies, offer prayer, question speakers, etc. Yet despite their theological suspicions, it should give pause to read that Scripture clearly instructs, “do not forbid to speak in tongues” (1Co 14:39). Perhaps tongues have indeed ceased, but maybe not. Are we really so sure of our theology that we are willing to directly contradict a biblical command?

Another practical consideration for participatory meetings concerns the idea of a moderator or master of ceremonies. Notice that none is mentioned in 1 Corinthians 14. As a church matures in experiencing interactive gatherings, the need for someone to moderate the meeting will diminish. Ideally, a visitor to a properly functioning church would not even know who its leaders were unless there was a problem that required correction.

A “warning shot across the bow” was fired by the inspired writer in 1 Corinthians 14:38. After stating that these orderly, interactive meetings are the “Lord’s command” (14:37), he then cautioned that anyone who disregards what was written would be “ignored.” Though unclear as

to exactly what this meant, some type of penalty was threatened. A price would be paid for disregarding the “Lord’s command” for church meetings.

### **SOME PRACTICAL ADVICE**

The authors of this book have many combined years of practical experience with participatory meetings. We have observed that there are some typical problems to be expected. We detail these below in the hope that those just beginning to experiment with interactive meetings can avoid some of the more common pitfalls.

**Pew Potatoes.** Most church folks, after years of attending services, are conditioned to sit silently, as if watching TV. It takes encouragement and patience to overcome this. Meaningful participation will seem awkward to people at first. Continual prompting and encouraging by the leadership during the week may be necessary until people “break the sound barrier.” The leaders can prompt interaction by asking, “Is there a testimony the Lord would have you to bring? Is there a song that would edify the church?” “Is there some subject or passage of Scripture to teach on?”

If a string were stretched across a stream at water level, various things would become attached to it as the day passed, things that otherwise would have floated on past. Similarly, thinking all week long about what to bring to the meeting helps greatly. If no one brought food for the *agape* love feast, there would not be much of a feast. Similarly, if no one comes to the meeting prepared to contribute, there will not be much of a meeting! Men, do your wives spend more time preparing for church (by cooking food for the *agape* feast) than you do (in considering something to say in the meeting)?

**Unedifying Remarks.** Sometimes after folks do start talking, they get a little too casual.

They begin to chat about things that really don’t edify the assembly. Just because it is an “open” meeting does not mean people can say anything they want to say. Leaders need to remind the church that anything said in the meeting must be designed to build up the body and to encourage

everyone. As Peter said, “If anyone speaks, he should do it as speaking the very words of God” (1Pe 4:11). Church meetings are also not to be therapy sessions for the wounded, with everything focused on one person and his needs. Though such people do need counseling, it is generally to be done at a time other than the corporate assembly.

**Pooled Ignorance.** Rather than study a subject in advance to bring a teaching, some folks will come to the meeting totally unprepared and simply plop a question out before the gathered church for an answer. This is the opposite of bringing a teaching. It is sort of an anti-teaching. Leaders should discourage people from asking such questions to the church out of ignorance. Such questions only edify the person asking the question and are not designed to edify the church. It is too “me” oriented. It is asked to meet a personal need. Moreover, since it is unlikely that anyone will have recently studied the topic under question, pooled ignorance will likely abound as everyone offers their opinions.. There simply is no substitute for the careful, systematic, indepth study of Scripture in private and in advance of the meeting, and there is no excuse for not so doing.

**Over-Scheduled Meetings.** Those used to church bulletins will want to arrange teaching, music, etc. in advance. Beware of quenching the Spirit! It is clear from 1 Corinthians 14 that New Testament church meetings were generally spontaneous.

**Disruptive Visitors.** There are many kinds of disruptive visitors. Uninformed guests can easily hijack a meeting by unedifying remarks. Self-centered people will try to take dominate the meeting. The mentally unstable will speak loudly and often, to the chagrin of the assembly. Critics may attack what the church does or believes in the meeting. Heretics will view the interactive meetings as a chance to promote their errant theology. Leaders are needed in such cases to restore order with wisdom and patience. Visitors should be prompted in advance of the divine guidelines found in 1 Corinthians 14. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure! (See the sample prospective visitor’s letter at the end). It may be appropriate to invite the critic to

air his opinions later, after the meeting is over, during the fellowship of the Lord's Supper or in private with the elders.

**Population Control.** Meetings that are either too big or too small create their own set of hindrances to interactive gatherings. Too few people can seem dull. Too many people present will intimidate the shy and work against open sharing.

**Worship Leaders.** Musicians are to facilitate the church's singing and worship, not control it. Beware of worship leaders who would take over the meeting and make it into a show.

**Punctuality.** Relation-based churches are notoriously bad about starting late. If it is announced that a meeting will begin at a certain time, then the leaders need to be sure that it does start at that time. It is a matter of courtesy and respect for the value of other people's time. Arriving on time also shows respect. Consistently being late for a meeting is often a sign of passive aggression. At the very least it is rude and inconsiderate.

**The Master of Ceremonies.** Some leaders will tend to want to emcee the meetings, as if they were television talk-show hosts. Perhaps such prompting will be necessary in the infancy of a church, but in maturity this will not be needed. Further, there is nothing wrong with silence occasionally. Trust the Holy Spirit to guide the assembly. Ideally, a visitor in a 1 Corinthians 14 meeting should not be able to tell who the elders are in the church. Unless there is a problem, the elders should just blend in with everyone else! Admittedly, lack of participation on the part of the members can be a problem, so elders may need to lead out more in such cases to encourage input from others.

**Children.** The New Testament pattern seems to indicate that children were present in the meeting with their parents. For example, Paul intended some of his letters to be read aloud to the entire church (see Col 4:16). Based on Ephesians 6:1-3, children were present in the Ephesian church meetings or they would not have been present to hear Paul's instructions to them when the letter was read. (Compare also Mt 19:13-15, Lk 2:41-50, Ac 21:5.)

However, a very young child who begins crying loudly in the meeting should be removed from the meeting by a parent until he is quieted. Older children must be taught to sit still or play silently on the floor so as not to disrupt the meeting. Some parents will be oblivious to this need and in such cases the leadership must speak to the parents in private to enlist their cooperation in controlling their children.

**False expectations.** People will invariably come to the 1 Corinthians 14 gatherings with preconceived notions of what the meeting should be like. Some, for instance, some will want a moving worship service, or to sing only the great hymns of the faith. Others will exclusively associate praise songs with heartfelt worship, or expect dramatic healings to take place, or want a high powered Bible lecture, or some emotional presentation of the gospel. When their expectations are not met, disappointment and discontentment are the result. Church leaders need to be aware of this and take steps to help people to have biblical expectations of the meetings and to have the same goals that our Lord does.

### **SOME OBJECTIONS**

Some overseers voice vigorous objection to this type of church meeting. With good reason they fear that chaos and anarchy could break out. It must be remembered, however, that while there is order in a cemetery, there is no life there. It is much better to have life and risk a little disorder! Keeping order is one of the duties of an elder. Church leaders are also responsible for training the saints so that they are equipped to contribute meaningfully to such a meeting and to judge error for themselves. Further, the Holy Spirit must be trusted to work in the life of a church. If the Scriptures truly reveal God's desire for participatory meetings, then God will also see to it that the meetings will be successful in the long run.

Frankly, some pastors will oppose the guidelines of 1 Corinthians 14 precisely because enacting them will result in a lack of focus on the pastor. Sadly, a small percentage of pastors are on ego trips, or have their need for self affirmation fulfilled by being the "star player" in a

service. This is a blind-spot that must be overcome.

Impedance to the commands of 1 Corinthians 14 can also occur if believers become so intoxicated with their newly found freedom that they essentially run off into anarchy or gnosticism. They become overly wary of “agendas.” To them, anyone with leadership skills is somehow self-willed or evil. Yet it is obvious that Paul, a godly leader, had a godly “agenda” for the churches to which he ministered. Balance is a key consideration. We need to be about the Lord’s agenda of helping His churches come into compliance with everything the Lord commanded!

Many people have read 1 Corinthians 14 and judged their churches to be in complete compliance merely because the congregation participates through responsive readings, genuflecting, partaking of the wafer and wine of the Lord’s Supper, singing hymns, giving tithes and offerings, etc. Part of the problem is that all of this is planned out, it is not spontaneous, the structure is the same every week, and the entire order of worship is laid out in the bulletin. There may be limited audience participation, but there is no real liberty. Is any one of the brothers free to pick a hymn? To bring a teaching? To raise his hand and ask a question? Is there spontaneity?

#### **CONCLUSION: AFFIRMATIONS & DENIALS**

What conclusions can be drawn about the way God desires the weekly, Lord’s Day church meeting to be conducted? We affirm that:

1. The meeting is to be participatory and spontaneous.
2. Anything said or done must be designed to strengthen (edify) the whole church.
3. Only one person at a time is to address the assembly.
4. Everything is to be done in a fitting and orderly way
5. One of an elder’s roles in such meetings to keep it “on track” and true to the prime directive that all things be done unto edifying.

6. This type of interactive meeting is not optional, is not just interesting history, is not just quaint information. Such meetings are the “Lord’s command” (1Co 14:37).

Conversely, we deny that:

1. “Worship services” were held by the New Testament church.
2. Huge assemblies of Christians meeting for weekly worship is a New Testament pattern.
3. Church meetings need to be led from the front by a worship leader.
4. Bulletins are necessary or even slightly beneficial to a church meeting.
5. Only one person can teach in the meeting.
6. Teachers should be scheduled in advance.
7. Ritual and ceremony were part of New Testament church meetings.
8. Special aids to worship are important, such as incense, costumes, icons, statues, stained glass, or ornate cathedral-like buildings.
9. Performance-like shows are legitimate substitutes for the New Testament prescription.

— Steve Atkerson

### **A LETTER TO PROSPECTIVE VISITORS**

We are honored that you have expressed an interest in visiting one of our church meetings. We have made a conscious effort to seek to follow the traditions of the original apostles in our church practice. Thus, even though we are quite “traditional” in the NT sense, what we do is rather unconventional by contemporary standards. Anyhow, the following will give you a good idea of what to expect. Our hope is that you will feel comfortable and encouraged when meeting with us.

We meet in the morning, in the city of \_\_\_\_\_. For location and directions, please call Bob & Jame Smith at (000)-000-0000 or Bill & Sue Jones at (000)-000-0000.

**1.** Following the pattern of the New Testament, the church comes together regularly on the first day of each week. This is known in Scripture as the Lord’s Day, the day Jesus conquered

death and rose from the grave. We do not, however, see it as any type of sabbath day. Every day is a holy day under the New Covenant (Heb 4, Col 2:16 - 17, Ga 4:8 - 11).

**2.** The doors of the host's home open at 10 a.m. and the singing starts promptly one half hour later. Thus you can see that there is a 30 minute window for folks to come in, get settled, visit, get coffee, etc. Please try to park on the same side of the street on which the home is located. This will make it less likely that our cars will choke up the neighborhood street.

**3.** Our dress code is casual and comfortable. Nobody wears a tie. Ladies wear anything from comfortable dresses to pants to modest shorts. Children usually end up playing outside after the meeting and therefore wear play clothes and shoes. Getting dirty is not uncommon for the kids.

**4.** The meeting itself is spontaneous and interactive (no bulletin!) following the pattern outlined in 1 Corinthians 14:25ff. Nothing is pre-planned except the starting time of the first song (10:30 A.M.). Sometimes we sing many songs, sometimes we sing a few songs. On one Sunday three brothers may teach, while on other weeks no one will teach. Sometimes we pray a long time, sometimes very little. All the brothers can participate verbally, but everything said must be designed to edify the whole church (1Co 14:26). Only one person at a time is allowed to address the assembly, since everything is to be done in a fitting and orderly way. All teaching and prophecies are liable to public cross examination and judgment by those who are present. Further, there is no moderator nor emcee *per se*. In fact, unless there is a problem to correct, you will not even know who our leaders are.

**5.** Inquiring minds will want to know that our church holds to the historic doctrines of the Christian faith, the doctrines of grace, new covenant theology ([www.ids.org](http://www.ids.org)), biblical inerrancy ([www.churchcouncil.org](http://www.churchcouncil.org)), and the Danver's statement on biblical manhood and womanhood ([www.cbmw.org](http://www.cbmw.org)). You can find out more about NT church life at [www.ntrf.org](http://www.ntrf.org).

**6.** The children stay with us in the meeting, though if a really young child gets noisy one of his

parents will take him out until he calms down. If you have young children you may wish to bring along something to keep them happy, such as a drawing pad and crayons or *quiet* toys. The kids usually sit on the floor close to their parents. We believe it is the parent's job, not the church's, to teach their children about Jesus. Thus, we purposely have no Sunday school nor children's church.

**7.** The Lord's Supper is an integral part of our gathering. Actually, it is the primary reason we come together each week. We eat it as a full meal as is clearly described in 1 Corinthians 11. Everyone brings something to share with the whole church. We believe it is to be a true meal to typify the wedding banquet of the Lamb. It's a great time of fellowship and encouragement and very much like a wedding party rather than a funeral. In the middle of all the food you will notice the one cup (a jug, actually) and the one loaf, representing the body and blood of our Lord. We believe the Lord's Supper was originally designed to remind Jesus of His promise to return and partake of the meal again with His people. Feel free to partake of the bread and the fruit of the vine as you go through the food line. There is not an official ending time. Just leave after you have dined and enjoyed sufficient fellowship!

**8.** In short, we believe that the patterns for church life evident in the New Testament are not merely descriptive, but are actually prescriptive (2Th 2:15, 1Co 11:2). Thus, we believe in home-based and sized fellowships, elder-led more so than elder-ruled churches, the ministry of itinerant workers, interactive meetings, and that the Lord's Supper and the Agape Feast are synonymous weekly events. You may find it helpful to read through 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 and 1 Corinthians 14:26-40 before coming.

**9.** For us, true church life occurs every day, as we see each other during the week, all week long. To facilitate this, we place a high priority on living as close together as is practical. So, the Lord's Day activities described above are a limited expression of our weekly fellowship. To evaluate us based solely on what you observe in a Sunday meeting would be an incomplete

analysis!

**10.** Should you not live in our immediate area, we ultimately would discourage you from being a regular part of our fellowship. Church is to be about community, not commuting! To fellowship with the saints only on Sundays is to do yourself a disservice. And, since we are committed to living room sized churches, we have no way accommodate large numbers of folks driving in every week from all points on the compass. What we can do is to help you start a church in your own neighborhood once you get the vision for New Testament church life.

In summary, our churches are committed to meeting and living out as simple as possible a reading and understanding of what the New Testament church gave us for a pattern. We know we don't have it all figured out yet. We are a work in progress! We tend to take issues one at a time and attempt to come to a biblically-based consensus before moving on. Everybody counts and ideally nobody gets run over or discounted. This means we sometimes move pretty slow, but with a high degree of peace and unity. For that we have been blessed and are grateful.

See you on the Lord's Day!

#### **THE NEW TESTAMENT WAY OF MEETING**

How is it then, brethren? When ye come together, everyone of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying.

If any man speak in an unknown tongue, let it be by two or at the most by three, and that by course, and let one interpret. But if there be no interpreter, let him keep silence in the church; and let him speak to himself, and to God.

Let the prophets speak two or three, and let the other judge. If anything be revealed to another that sitteth by, let the first hold his peace. For ye may all prophesy one by one, that all

may learn, and all may be comforted. And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets.

For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints.

Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. And if they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for a woman to speak in the church. What! Came the word of God out from you? Or came it to you only?

If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord. But if any man be ignorant, let him be ignorant.

Wherefore, brethren, covet to prophesy, and forbid not to speak with tongues. Let all things be done decently, and in order.

— 1 Corinthians 14:26-40 (KJV)

### **THE MODERN WAY OF MEETING**

How is it then, brethren? When ye come together, the pastor hath a doctrine, and the minister of music hath psalms. Let all things be done unto worship.

If anyone besides the pastor hath a doctrine, let him not speak; let him hold his peace. Let him sit in the pew, and face the back of the neck of the person which sitteth ahead of him.

Let the people keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith church tradition. But if they will learn anything, let them ask their pastor after the service, for it is a shame for a layman to speak in the church. For the pastor, he hath a seminary degree, and the layman, he hath not so lofty a degree.

If any man desire to remain a church member in good standing, let him acknowledge that what I write to you is the command of the denominational headquarters. But if any man ignore this, he shall be promptly escorted out the door by the ushers.

Wherefore brothers, covet not to speak in the church. Let all things be done decently and in

the order in which it hath been written in the church bulletin.

— Rusty Entrekin

“We are a society with a common religious feeling, unity of discipline, a common bond of hope. We meet in gatherings and congregations to approach God in prayer, massing our forces to surround Him . . . We meet to read the divine Scriptures . . . Our presidents are elders of proved character . . .

Even if there is a treasury of a sort, it is not made up of money paid in initiation fees, as if religion were a matter of contract. Every man once a month brings some modest contribution – or whenever he wishes, and only if he does wish, and if he can; for nobody is compelled; it is a voluntary offering . . . to feed the poor and to bury them, for boys and girls who lack property and parents, and then for slaves grown old . . .

So we, who are united in mind and soul, have no hesitation about sharing property. All is common among us – except our wives. At that point we dissolve our partnership . . .

Our dinner shows its idea in its name; it is called by the Greek name for love . . . We do not take our places at table until we have first partaken of prayer to God. Only so much is eaten as satisfies hunger. After water for the hands come the lights; and then each, from what he knows of the Holy Scriptures, or from his own heart, is called before the rest to sing to God.

Prayer in like manner ends the banquet . . .”

*(Roman Civilization Source Book II: The Empire, p. 588)*

*Tertullian lived around A.D. 200*

## **4**

### **PREACHING & TEACHING**

#### **PART ONE**

For over one thousand years Christian church practice has been largely based on sources other than the Word of God. This has left us with a real legacy of things that desperately need to

be corrected as far as church practice is concerned. Part of that legacy is that we have departed quite drastically from the way Bible teaching and corporate instruction was done in the early church. By far the most serious departure in this regard is the virtually universal practice of revolving the gathering of the church on the Lord's Day around preaching and teaching, usually as done by one person.

In the New Testament, however, we see something rather different. What we find there is churches meeting on Sundays, in people's houses, and with a twofold purpose. Firstly, they had completely open, participatory and spontaneous sharing together and worship which, by definition, wasn't led from the front in any way. Secondly, they ate the Lord's Supper together as their main meal of the day. Given such a set up, and it is indeed how the apostles universally set churches up to be like, then certain things would subsequently, and quite logically, find no place. For instance, in such a set up there is not the slightest need for religious or sacred buildings. Hence it will come as no surprise that we therefore find the churches in the New Testament meeting exclusively in people's homes. Something else you won't find in the New Testament either is a Sunday service, led from the front, with those attending sitting audience-style in rows and participating only in singing and, maybe, a bit of open prayer and the like. Neither will you find in the New Testament anything that even faintly resembles a sermon. Such a practice would go completely against what the very essence of a church gathering on Sundays was originally seen to be. The apostles set churches up in such a way that when they came together on the Lord's Day the rule was strictly, "each one has . . . for you may all prophesy one by one" (1Co 14:26, 31). They set churches up in such a way that would positively encourage all those gathered to participate, and therefore brought about a situation where the Lord would be free to move by His Spirit through each part of His body. Any idea of the Lord's Day gathering of the church revolving around the ministry of any one individual flies completely in the face of scripture and contradicts it outright.

This is not to say, however, that there isn't a place for the type of teaching amongst God's people whereby one person predominates in giving it. The Lord does indeed provide people in churches who are gifted in this very thing, and the New Testament makes it clear that teaching is a calling and gift of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, in the church of which I am a part we meet for Bible Study on Tuesday evenings, and we work very hard at furthering our understanding of God's Word. But in the New Testament the coming together of a church on Sundays was not the time when such gifts were exercised in that particular way, and the push was always for mutual participation; for lots of people to share something, including a short teaching, rather than for one person to predominate or lead in any way.

And this helps us to at last take the emphasis away from leadership, and from our inclination to just revolve around those who are gifted in teaching and public speaking ability and to consequently make *big men* of them. It helps to keep us safe from the evil of the whole *clergy/laity* divide thing, and from the completely unbiblical two-tier system of *leaders* and *led* which creates hierarchy. Hierarchy is something no church should ever have, and the only hierarchy found in the pages of the New Testament, pertaining to church life, is simply Jesus and everyone else. Even elders - for that is what a biblically based church will either have or be moving towards, a plurality of co-equal, male elders who have been raised up from among those they serve - are strictly in the *everyone else* category.

Moreover, this biblical way of doing things we are seeing creates a set up in which people feel free to question whatever is being taught in order to test and understand it more fully. It also makes those who teach realise that the onus is on them to do so in such a way as to persuade people that what they are saying is actually biblical. It helps minimise the danger of those who are taught being expected to just passively accept things because it's what the leaders teach, or because of some daft idea of 'accepted church policy' or something. It brings about a situation wherein people are much more likely to actively and questioningly understand rather than merely

passively accept things as being the case and just agree. It creates, in short, what many leaders in many churches fear most, *people with open Bibles and free-thinking minds who don't accept things merely on the authority of a leader's say-so, but who question and challenge until they are persuaded that something is or isn't biblical*. It further releases the corporate insight and wisdom of all in the church, and engenders an atmosphere of humility and the willingness for everyone to learn from anyone. It recognises the vitally important fact that the Lord is in *all* His people, and can therefore speak through any of those in the church and not just some *chosen and verbally gifted elite*.

But I must deal now with what might, in some people's minds, be perceived as a real and biblically-based objection to what I'm saying here: Paul's preaching. Take a look at a particular Sunday that Paul the Apostle spent with the church in Troas: "On the first day of the week we came together to break bread. Paul spoke to the people and, because he intended to leave the next day, kept on talking until midnight" (Ac 20:7).

Here we have the believers in Troas coming together for their main weekly gathering, and we can note certain things. (By the way, no Bible scholar would disagree with any of the following observations I am going to make. They are a simple matter of textual fact.)

- The church is gathering on the first day of the week, on Sunday.
- They were gathering together in someone's house.
- The Greek text here conveys that the main purpose given for their coming together was for the breaking of bread.
- The phrase *breaking of bread* refers to eating a full meal, here the Lord's Supper.

Now the thing I want to focus on here is that Paul "spoke to the people" and "kept on talking until midnight." That certainly makes it sound as if Paul is doing the talking and that everyone else is just listening. So if that is the case then there isn't much open, un-led participatory stuff going on here as we might expect to see, assuming of course that what I've written so far isn't

complete nonsense. But there's worse to come, because in some translations of the Bible this verse actually reads, "Paul preached unto them . . . and continued his speech until midnight." That doesn't just sound like a Sunday sermon, that sounds like the very mother and father of all Sunday sermons either before or since! Paul, if this verse is to be believed, not only preached to the church, but continued to do so until midnight. What on earth can I say to that in the light of the burden of this article? Well, it's actually very simple. The original Greek doesn't say here quite what the English translation conveys. Luke doesn't use any of the various Greek words for *preach* at all. He rather describes what Paul was doing here until midnight with the word *dialogemai*. And *dialogemai*, as any Greek scholar will tell you, means *to converse, to discuss, to reason or dispute with*. It denotes a two-way verbal trafficking between different parties and is actually the Greek word from which we get the English word *dialogue*.

Preaching is a monologue, and in certain settings of church life that may well be fine.

Midweek Bible studies, for example, may very well be conducted at times by one person doing a monologue followed by questions. But in the New Testament, when the Lord's people come together on Sundays as a church, it's strictly *dialogue* that goes on, and this is precisely what Paul is doing here. He is most certainly teaching the church, and it goes on most of the night because they wanted to learn all they could from him, but it was a discussion-type format and not a monologue of some kind. It was participatory and interactive, and therefore completely in keeping with the way the apostles set up Sunday gatherings of churches to be like. In short, Paul was simply conversing with them. It was a dialogue, and he and the assembled church were reasoning together. It was two-way mutual communication. It was question and answer, point and counter-point, objection and explanation! Paul isn't here standing on some raised platform with everyone sitting silently just listening to him speaking *to* them. No, he is rather sitting on the sofa in the lounge talking *with* them.

There is of course a time, as I have already said, for something of a more formal lecture type

format, but even then let it be clear that whoever is teaching must be completely and fully open to questions concerning their subject matter. I don't by that necessarily mean in the middle of the teaching, but when the speaker has finished then let the questions and comeback flow. Let it be clear as well that whoever does do teaching, and the more brothers amongst whom this task is shared out the better, is just one of the brothers, and is not *special* or *spiritually elevated* just because they are gifted in a particular way. (At our Tuesday night Bible Studies at the church of which I am a part we also do lots of discussion and interactive type teaching sessions as well, and use the lecture type format as just one of various approaches.)

Let me end by making clear that I am not in the slightest down playing Bible teaching in the life of Christian churches. Far from it! Indeed, none of us would be going on about any of these things in the first place were it not for the fact we are into good solid Bible teaching ourselves, and keen to both receive it and to pass it on to others. No, we are simply saying that we have got to start doing things biblically. We must in this, as with everything else, get back in line with what the Word of God teaches rather than just sticking with age-old, yet completely unbiblical, traditions.

Churches need ongoing teaching, of that there can be no doubt. But they need other things too! To do some biblical things at the expense of other equally biblical things is, believe me, a big mistake. The apostles expected that, when believers met in their respective churches on the Lord's Day, it would be a case of, "When you come together each one has" (1Co14:26). That, then, is the way it should be! Nothing more and nothing less!

Got it? Good! It's pretty simple really, isn't it? After all, whose ideas and way of doing things have got to be the best? Jesus and His apostles? Or someone else's?

— Beresford Job

## **PART TWO**

In the past few months several people have asked me questions about the proper place of

“Bible study” in the assembly. For those in traditional churches fulfilling the above verse translates into being faithful to come and hear a “sermon” every Sunday morning in a church building. Those who have felt led to pursue *ekklesia* in more informal settings usually have questions about how “teaching” fits into the new scheme of things. Not a few, in reacting to the previous centrality of the pulpit, are leery of being “taught” by anybody, or fear that one person will dominate. Some feel that body gatherings should focus on *relational* issues instead of studying the Bible. Others feel that there must be teaching every week, or the saints will dry up. What can we learn from the New Testament to put these various concerns in proper perspective?

After 3,000 people believed and were baptized, “they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship [*koinonia*], to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Ac 2:42). We see here four central characteristics that marked the believers’ life together. The apostles were immediately involved in teaching the flock. So it is clear that *teaching* is very important in the *ekklesia*. But the teaching occurred in the setting of *koinonia*, eating and praying together.

Among the many gifts Christ gives to his people, some are gifted as *teachers* (Ep 4:11).

James says, “Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly” (3:1). Paul says, “if a person’s gift is teaching, let him teach” (Ro12:6-7). And in 1 Corinthians 12:28-29 Paul underscores the fact that Christ never intended for everybody to have the same gifting by asking, “Are all teachers?” On the other hand, the writer to the Hebrews chides *all the brethren* for their lack of growth by saying, “though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s word all over again” (5:12). So while it is clear that only *some* are gifted as teachers, all of Christ’s people are to be “teachers” in the broad sense of contributing to the overall edification of the body according to their gifting.

Obviously, groups of believers will vary greatly in their giftedness, but if the Lord has brought them together, they can be sure that “in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every

one of them, just as he wanted them to be" (1Co12:18). Some assemblies will have several gifted at teaching, some will have one person, and others may feel that they have none. The central thing to keep in mind is that all believers have the Holy Spirit (the "anointing") and are capable of some level of sharing Christ, of manifesting discernment, of caring for one another, and of understanding the Scriptures. When they come together in His name, they have every reason to expect Christ's presence (Mt18:20). In a *body meeting*, each person present has the responsibility to make sure they do not dominate and thereby stifle others. If there are multiple teachers, none should dominate. If there appears to be only one teacher, care should be taken that that gift should not end up being in the limelight. If there appear to be none gifted as teachers, then the body must work hard at trusting the Lord for edifying multiple participation. We are so used to the artificial thinking that assumes that teachers must have a background in a Bible School or seminary. This is not a Scriptural mindset. We must neither succumb to the cult of the expert, nor mute any eminent gifts in the body.

In Acts 20:7 we are specifically told that the purpose of the saints' gathering was to "break bread," not to hear teaching. However, in the course of that particular meeting – which was to be Paul's last appearance in their city — the apostle "dialogued" with them for a long time. What Paul had to say was the meat of the meeting, but it was not a monologue. It was discourse with interaction. This shows that while the *raison d'être* of the meeting was to eat (the Lord's Supper), it was still possible for teaching to take place.

The Corinthians evidently felt that everybody should speak in tongues. They were focusing on certain visible manifestations of the Spirit. Paul corrects this in 1 Corinthians 12-14. In chapter 14, he wants the spontaneity and multiple participation to continue, but in all of this he desires for *prophecy to be central*, and for *everything to be done for edification*. Prophecy by "all" results in *strengthening, encouragement, comfort and instruction* (14:3, 31). In verse 26, Paul mentions a few of many possible contributions that the saints can make to the meeting, and

one of them is “a teaching.” So, just as we should not forbid tongues (if there is interpretation), neither should we forbid teaching!

One thing that would help assemblies in all these issues surrounding “teaching” is if they would *learn how to study the Bible together with a view toward discerning the Lord’s mind and acting upon it*. Since there is so much false teaching floating around, it is vital for *ekklelesias* to search the Scriptures to see what is actually so. For example, on a host of topics — prayer, angels, body-life, humility, and love — it is certainly possible for a group of believers to photocopy from a concordance or print out from a computer a selection of verses to go over together in discussion and prayer. In the early church *apostolic epistles* were read to the assembly. That is something congregations should do with regularity. It must be stressed that any handling of God’s word by an *ekklelesia* should not be approached as a *stale, intellectual, academic exercise*. Our goal must be to exalt Jesus Christ together and obey what he reveals in his word.

Congregations will have their strengths and weaknesses. Some will be grounded in sound teaching, but weak in prayer. Some will excel in mutual caring, but be weak in some gospel truths. The general trend I have seen is that churches tend to be *all doctrine with little body-life, or focused on subjective experience with little sound teaching*. Why do we sever what God has joined together? We should strive to be *caring, practical fellowships who, as Paul exhorted, wish to hold fast to healthy teaching*. Therefore, brethren should always be evaluating their life together in light of a summary text like Acts 2:42, and openly discuss areas they need to grow in. James 1:19 exhorts all of us to be “quick to hear and slow to speak.” In any group of saints there will be those who tend to talk a lot, those who are reticent, and others inbetween. Those who are always ready to speak must be cautious and be sure they do not stifle the input of others. They must be careful not to dominate or to intimidate by a dogmatic tone that shuts down discussion. Those who are very hesitant to speak need an atmosphere of acceptance and love

where they can be encouraged to share as the Lord leads them. If our meetings are truly *open*, then we must be sensitive to the direction of the Spirit's leading. We must each be willing to defer to the needs of others. For example, if a body has new converts, or people who have just come out of a cult, or people who just experienced a major life-altering trauma, it will be necessary to focus on their special needs.

A big issue for all of us is the ability to listen carefully to the concerns of others in the body. If we really love each other, we will want to process the issues on other people's hearts. We may think their question or concern is misplaced, irrelevant, or a non-issue to us, but if we value them we will take their every word seriously. Thus, if you find yourself internalizing thoughts like, "this place is becoming like an arid seminary," "I can't keep up with the fine theological points that are being made," "all we talk about are people's experiences and we never get into the Word," "we study the Bible a lot but do not pray much," "we go through pretty much the same rut every week," "I'm feeling depressed and not encouraged when I leave the meeting," "So-and-so seems to dominate the meeting every week," "I sense a doctrinal imbalance is taking place," etc., you need to talk with the brothers and sisters. The problem may be you and your wrong perceptions, but when people have concerns they *must* be openly addressed. That is why it appears wise for an assembly to periodically discuss how their life together is going, so imbalances can be nipped in the bud.

The chemistry of each assembly is unique. The Spirit will take the things of Christ and apply them to our circumstances. What works for one group won't make sense in another group. But nothing will work unless the brethren are committed to pursuing the Gospel together, in humility preferring one another. The basic components of church life are given in the New Testament, and the odds are high (given the example of the seven *ekklesias* Christ evaluated) that every assembly has undealt with weaknesses that require change and repentance. Over the long haul together we need the proper mix of *teaching, singing, eating, praising, praying, caring, and*

many other attributes, in order to be healthy. Most of our concerns about how *teaching* comes to expression in an assembly would probably be resolved if more open discussion with one another and listening to one another were taking place.

— Jon Zens

### **PART THREE**

Though we firmly believe the concept of home-sized fellowships to be in accordance with apostolic tradition regarding church practice, it is important to emphasize that the scriptures also describe a much bigger attitude and church: a membership in the church universal. It is unhealthy for believers to exist exclusively in one isolated house church. Each house church, like it or not, is a part of the much bigger city church in whatever town or region it is located (the New Testament authors philosophically considered each city to contain but one church). Though they may never all meet together in one place, and though there is to be no outward ecclesiological authority controlling them, all the congregations in a given area constitute the church of that city. We are to have an attitude of oneness, acceptance, love, concern, and cooperation with all the other believers in our city.

What has all this big church talk got to do with preaching and teaching? Simply this: In our Bible teaching and interpretation we must not ignore the rest of the church as a whole. The Bible is our final authority, but it is not our *only* authority. The Holy Spirit has guided and worked in God's people for the 2,000 years since Jesus left and before we were even born. When the church of history has studied a matter and reached consensus on it, that becomes authoritative for us as well. Do we really have the right to dispute the theology of the church of the ages?

Who has the authority to decide upon the correct interpretation of the Bible, a single church (i.e. Rome), the individual believer, or the universal church as a whole? At one extreme, the Catholics will declare that as an individual you are not capable of interpreting your Bible, but rather that you should accept what Rome declares it to mean. At the opposite extreme, though,

many Evangelicals have replaced Rome with a new Pope in the form of the individual believer.

Just me and my Bible. Is this really much different?

Do we really trust that the Holy Spirit had guided the elect over the past two millennia?

When certain basic doctrines are agreed upon today by Christians from every conceivable background, and also by all those who went before us in the faith, that should get our attention.

That is authoritative. Some of these basics include a belief that the sixty-six books of the Bible do finally and completely comprise God's written revelation to us, the doctrine of the Trinity, the deity of Christ, the propitiatory nature of Jesus' work on the cross, justification by grace through faith unto good works, the future bodily return of Jesus, the future tomb-emptying resurrection of the dead, and the future earth-shattering Great White Throne Judgment.

The original doctrine of *sola scriptura* included the belief that whereas the Bible is our final authority, it is not our only authority. The church as a whole is also an authority (albeit a secondary one). As Paul wrote to Timothy, the church is "the pillar and foundation of the truth" (1Ti 3:15). When the entire church arrives at the same conclusions regarding theology, that is authoritative. Teachings contrary to doctrine universally agreed upon by the church at large are not to be entertained.

The church of history has passed on to us various creeds and confessions. The word "creed" is from a Latin root and simply means, "I believe." Did you know that there is even a post-New Testament, church-made creed printed in your Bible? It is called the "Table of Contents." The books of the Bible were not finally compiled and settled upon until quite some time after the apostolic era. How can we trust the church of history to give us the right books that are supposed to be in our Bibles and yet not also trust her to give us right theology about what that same Bible teaches? The main people who resist an acceptance of the basic creeds of the church are those who hold to aberrant theology, denying one or more of the essentials listed above.

Throw out the interpretations of the church as a whole, and you are left with individual

subjectivism. Keith Mathison, in his book, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura*, has aptly pointed out that modern American Evangelicalism has redefined *sola scriptura* in terms of secular Enlightenment rationalism and rugged democratic individualism. This modern reinterpretation grants autonomy to each individual believer's reason and judgment. The result is the relativism, subjectivism, and theological chaos that we see in modern Evangelicalism today. Mathison points out that each of us comes to the Scripture with different presuppositions, blind spots, ignorance of important facts, and, most importantly, sinfulness. Since we are far from neutral, each of us reads things into Scripture that are really *not* there and also misses things that *are* there. Reason and conscience become the final interpreter. The universal and objective truth of Scripture is made virtually of no effect, because instead of the Church proclaiming with one voice what the Bible teaches, every individual interprets Scripture as seems right in his own eyes. The unbelieving world is left hearing a cacophony of conflicting voices rather than the Word of the living God. In the final analysis, each individual is responsible for establishing *his own creed*.

The church as a whole has clearly spoken concerning the correct interpretation of many foundational doctrines of the Christian faith. To deny these is to deny the teachings of the Bible. Those who do not hold to sound orthodoxy are not to be allowed to teach their false doctrine (1Ti 1:3), and are not to be recognized as apostles, elders, or deacons (1Ti 3:9, Titus 1:9). Our churches are not like little row boats on Lake Placid. Instead, we will go through storms on the high seas. Challenges will come. Aberrant teaching will wash up on deck. It is not a matter of if, but when. Like the captains war ships, we must cry "Repel all boarders!" in guarding against and repelling heterodoxy theology. By "boarders" I mean the heresy and not its proclaimer. Of course, the difference between the two can be a fine line. We are to gently instruct those who oppose, "in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who had taken them captive to do his will" (2Ti 2:25-26).

— Steve Atkerson

## 5

### **CONSENSUS GOVERNING**

Why do you suppose that Jesus choose the word “church” to describe His followers?

“Church” is the English translation of the original Greek term *ekklesia*. Outside the context of the New Testament, *ekklesia* was a secular word that carried strong political connotations. There were other Greek words Jesus could have used to describe His followers and their gatherings, words that carried *religious* and *nonpolitical* connotations. As we will see, one of the reasons He chose the word *ekklesia* to describe His followers is because He wanted them to make corporate decisions that affected all of them as a group. How did Jesus intend for the church to be governed? Let’s begin by looking more closely at how the true meaning of the modern word “church” has been all but lost.

### **THE MODERN WORD “CHURCH” AND THE ANCIENT EKKLESIA**

According to Webster’s *New Collegiate Dictionary*, the word “church” can be used to refer, among other things, to either a meeting of God’s people or to the special building in which they meet. In contrast, the Greek word *ekklesia* never refers to a building or place of worship, and it can refer to *much more* than just a meeting, assembly, or gathering! Our understanding of God’s church will be much impoverished if we fail to factor in the dynamics of the original Greek word used by Jesus. In fact, there is so much emphasis today on the separation of church and state, that when people think of the word “church”, the last thought that comes to mind is one of a senate, parliament, politburo, or political government. And yet, such was the meaning of *ekklesia*. During the time of Jesus, the word *ekklesia* was used almost without exception to refer to a political assembly that was regularly convened for the purpose of making decisions. According to Thayer’s lexicon it was “an assembly of the people convened at the public place of council for the purpose of deliberation.” Bauer’s lexicon defines *ekklesia* as an “assembly of a regularly

summoned political body.” In Colin Brown’s *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, *ekklesia* is said to have been “clearly characterized as a political phenomenon, repeated according to certain rules and within a certain framework. It was the assembly of full citizens, functionally rooted in the constitution of the democracy, an assembly in which fundamental political and judicial decisions were taken . . . the word *ekklesia*, throughout the Greek and Hellenistic areas, always retained its reference to the assembly of the polis.” In the secular *ekklesia*, every male citizen had “the right to speak and to propose matters for discussion” (women were not allowed to speak at all in the secular Greek *ekklesia*).

This secular usage can be illustrated from within the Bible as well, in Acts 19:23-41. These Acts 19 occurrences of *ekklesia* (translated “assembly,” “legal assembly,” and “assembly” in 19:32, 39, 41) referred to a meeting of craftsmen who had been called together by Demetrius into the town theater to decide what to do about Paul, though there was so much confusion the majority did not know why they had been summoned. This is an example of *ekklesia* used to refer to a regularly summoned political body (in this case, silver craftsmen and those in related trades). They convened (as a sort of trade union) to decide what to do about a damaged reputation and lost business. As it turned out, they overstepped their jurisdiction in wanting to deal with Paul, so the city clerk suggested that the matter be settled by the “legal” *ekklesia* (rather than by the trade union *ekklesia*, Ac 19:37-39).

### **JESUS’ USE OF EKKLESIA**

In light of all this, why did Jesus (in Mt 16:13-20; 18:15-20) choose such a politically “loaded” word as *ekklesia* to describe His people and their meetings? Evidently, at least part of the reason was because He intended for the meetings of Christians to be somewhat similar to the meetings of the citizens of the Greek city-states. Jesus intended that believers are to propose matters for discussion, to decide things together, to make joint decisions, to govern by consensus. Had Jesus merely wanted to describe a gathering with no such political connotation, he could

have used *sunagoge*, *thiasos* or *eranos*. Significantly, however, He chose *ekklesia*.

God's people have a decision-making mandate. A "church" is fundamentally a body of Kingdom citizens who are authorized (and expected) to weigh issues, make decisions, and pass judgments. Though decision making will not occur at every meeting (there aren't usually issues to resolve), an understanding that the church corporately has the authority and obligation to settle things is important. Churches whose meetings focus solely on praise music and teaching, never grappling corporately with problems and resolving issues, may be failing to fulfill their full purpose as an *ekklesia*.

There are many examples in the New Testament of God's people making decisions as a body. That Jesus expected decision making from the *ekklesia* is seen in Matthew 16:13-20. After promising to build His *ekklesia* on the rock of Peter's revealed confession, Jesus immediately spoke of the keys of the kingdom of heaven and of binding and loosing. Keys represent the ability to open and to close something, "kingdom" is a political term, and binding and loosing involves the authority to make decisions. Then, in Matthew 18:15-20, Jesus said that the *ekklesia* (18:17) is obligated to render a verdict regarding a brother's alleged sin, and once again, binding and loosing authority is conferred upon the *ekklesia*.

In Acts 1:15-26, Peter charged the Jerusalem church as a whole with finding a replacement for Judas.

In Acts 6:1-6, the apostles looked to the church corporately to pick men to administer the church's welfare system.

Acts 14:23 (marginal translation) indicates that some churches elected their own elders.

In Acts 15:1-4, the church of Antioch decided to send to Jerusalem for arbitration, and then the whole church in Jerusalem was in on the resolution of the conflict (15:4, 12, 22).

Finally, Paul continued this idea in 1 Corinthians 14:29-30, where it was made clear that judgment was to be passed on prophetic revelation when "the whole *ekklesia* comes together"

(14:23).

It is important to note that the church, in its decision making role, should be judicial rather than legislative. The church's job is not to create law – only God can rightly do that. This is one point where the *ekklesia* of God's people is different in function from the *ekklesia* of Greek citystates. Our as believers within Christ's *ekklesia* is to correctly apply and enforce the law of Christ as contained in the New Covenant. Church members are to be like citizen-judiciaries who meet together to deliberate and decide issues, or to render judgments (when necessary). This form of government works tolerably well in a house church where people love each other enough to work through their disagreements. It is virtually impossible to operate this way in a larger institutional church setting.

#### **APPLICATION**

Of course, not all occurrences of the word *ekklesia* in the New Testament involve decision making. In fact, the word *ekklesia* is actually used six different ways in the New Testament. Still, its most fundamental usage is that of a group of people gathered for the purpose of making decisions. In this sense, the *ekklesia* is not merely the coming together of God's people. Rather, it is also what *occurs* when God's people come together. The church is authorized by the Lord to make decisions about the correct application of Scripture, and it is expected to enforce the law of Christ (within the family of God) and to deal with issues as they arise. This is a *part* of what is to occur in open, participatory church meetings. Problems must not be swept under the rug. Questions of correct conduct must be resolved. Of course, there will not be issues to resolve every week (or even most weeks), but God's people must ever bear in mind their obligation to function as an *ekklesia* when necessary.

In its human organization, the church is not supposed to be a pyramid with power concentrated at the top in either one man or a few. Decisions are not to be made behind closed doors and then handed down from on high for the church to follow. The church is rather like the

senate or a congress that deliberates upon, and decides, issues as an assembly. The church's leaders are to facilitate this process and to serve the church by providing needed teaching and advice, but they are not the church's lords!

Of course, there are limits to what a local church, as a decision-making body, can decide.

Certain topics are out of bounds, are off-limits, are category errors. For instance, a house church has no license to redefine the historic Christian Faith. Some things are simply not open for debate. *Ekklesia* is to operate within the bounds of orthodoxy. The elders are to rule out-of-order the consideration of harmful and heretical ideas. This is because the church at large today, and throughout time past, already has consensus on certain fundamental interpretations of Scripture (such as which writings make up the Bible, the Gospel message, the Trinity, the future bodily return of Jesus, etc.).

### **CONSENSUS OR MAJORITY RULE?**

Because the *ekklesia* is to deliberate as an assembly upon issues that arise, what if there is disagreement and the members split on an issue? Are decisions made by *consensus* or *majority vote*? Let's first consider what is implied in those two options.

The word "consensus" means "general agreement, representative trend or opinion." It is related to the word "consent" or "consensual". In contrast, majority rule can be a 51% dictatorship for the 49% who didn't agree, and this certainly works against unity. Consensus, however, seeks to build unity. Would God have His church make decisions based on consensus or majority rule? Consider the following biblical texts are you and I reach a consensus on this issue!:

"How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity" (Ps 133:1).

"I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought" (1Co 1:10).

“Consequently, you are . . . members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit” (Ep 2:19-22).

“Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit - just as you were called to one hope when you were called - one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Ep 4:3-6).

“If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose” (Php 2:1-2).

“Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity” (Col 3:12-15).

Most of the process of consensus building will not occur during a church meeting. Instead, it will go on during the fellowship of the Lord’s Supper, in midweek visits, over lunch, via casual phone conversations, by e-mail, etc. Of course sometimes various brothers, and especially leaders, may bring teachings during the interactive meeting that are relevant to the issue under consideration. The majority of the deliberation, however, will take place one on one, brother to brother. Bringing the church members into agreement with one another takes time, patience, humility and gentleness.

### **GOD’S PROVISION**

It is important to remember that the process a church goes through in achieving consensus is often just as important as the consensus that is finally achieved. Consensus governing takes time,

commitment, mutual-edification, and a lot of brotherly love. It truly *can* work in a small, housesized church. We must love each other enough to put up with each other! The concept behind consensus might be government by unity, oneness, harmony, or mutual agreement. Do we really trust in the Holy Spirit to work in our lives and churches?

Lest government by consensus seem too utopian, consider what the Lord has done to help His people achieve unity. First, our Lord Himself prayed for His church “that they may be one as we are one . . . My prayer is . . . that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you . . . May they be brought into complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (Jn 17:11, 20-23). Since Jesus prayed this for us, unity is certainly achievable.

Another provision God made for our unity lies in the Lord’s Supper. According to 1 Corinthians 10:17, “Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.” Evidently, properly partaking of the one loaf during the Lord’s Supper not only pictures unity, it can even create it!

Finally, as already mentioned above, Christ gave various ministry and leadership gifts to the church (such as apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers) for a purpose: “until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Ep 4:11-13). One reason Christ give the church such leaders is to help the church achieve consensus.

### **WHAT ABOUT ELDERS?**

Where and how do elders factor into church government by corporate consensus? As is pointed out in other chapters, elders are critical to the long-term survival of a church. Elders guide, persuade, teach, feed, council, protect, warn, advise, rebuke and correct.

The church as a whole may be compared to a senate, with the authority to make decisions and render judgments that are binding on its members. A church elder is just a fellow senator, but

one who is on a special senate committee whose purpose is to study issues, make recommendations, teach, inform, or prompt. Normally, the elder is not to make decisions on behalf of the church. He does not preempt the consensus process. All elders are senator-servants to the whole senate (church). However, the senate will occasionally find itself in grid-lock, unable to resolve an issue. In such cases, the elders serve as predetermined arbitrators, or tie breakers, and in such unusual instances those in opposition are to “submit” to the elder’s leadership and wisdom (see Hebrews 13:17).

Thus in the final analysis churches are to be *elder-led* more so than *elder-ruled*. The only times when a church must be temporarily *elder-ruled* is when one or a few within the church become self-willed, unreasonable, obstinate, divisive, enslaved to sin, or deceived into false doctrine.

## **CONCLUSION**

Some churches are episcopal in their form of government; such a church could be compared to a monarchy. Other churches are ruled by a plurality of elders or a presbytery; this could be called rule by aristocracy. Still others follow congregational rule; these could be called a democracies. What we have argued for in this chapter is really sort of a parliamentary monarchy! Jesus is our Monarch, and the church is His consensus-based parliament (with elders as predetermined tie-breakers).

— Steve Atkerson

## **6**

### ***HOUSE CHURCHES***

#### **PART ONE**

Where we meet is very important. It is, of course, not as important as the living stones that are being plastered together as the church, but it is still important. I am fascinated by how often people who think like we do on many different points, will balk at my emphasis on meeting in the

house. Why is this?

One reason, I think, is super-spirituality. Let the organized church worry about buildings, these folks say, but we're going to worry about building the body of Christ, and we can do that anywhere, in any building. This sounds good, but it is entirely unrealistic.

Architects and business consultants have realized for a long time that buildings and their accoutrements will affect people's moods and relationships. One thinks of the proverbial banker's desk and visitor's chair. When you sit in the chair, the desk is about neck-high, and you feel very small and very inferior to the banker. Take another example: suppose you want to have close, intimate communion with your brothers and sisters. You go to a church building. You put the chairs in a circle. You're still faced with the open spaces that kill intimacy, and make it hard to hear. You've got cold fluorescent lights overhead. And you've got decades of acculturation to deal with. When you're in a building, you're used to thinking institutionally and formally.

Let me quote from a critic who believes in church life, but who thinks the building in which the church meets is not important: "I do not believe that the answer lies in forsaking 'church buildings' in favor of 'living rooms.' Nor are sweat shirts and jeans inherently more conducive to effective fellowship and ministry than three piece suits and neckties. It seems to me that such proposals merely exchange one external 'hang-up' for another. To prove that there were no 'church buildings' in the first few decades of the church's existence is to prove nothing. There were also no automobiles, or telephones, or computers, or printing presses . . . Should we also view these advances as detrimental to church life? Or does the real problem actually lie in the way we use these tools? If a church 'building' is worshiped more than the One in whose name we gather, something has certainly gone wrong. If such is the case, selling the building and crowding into a living room will do little to solve the problem. What is needed is a change of heart and mind, not of location and surroundings . . . It is just as easy to spawn and perpetuate false teaching, factionalism, groundless ritual, and stifling traditions in a living room as it is in a

‘church building.’ And one can be deliberately ostentatious in ragged jeans and worn-out Reeboks as in a well pressed suit and polished wingtips.”

Let’s examine one by one the propositions set forth above. The first is, “I do not believe that the answer lies in forsaking ‘church buildings’ in favor of ‘living rooms’.” This is a half-truth, and like all half-truths, it is entirely misleading. Of course, exchanging church buildings in favor of living rooms is not the whole answer. It is however, part of the answer. In fact, it is a necessary part of the answer (although it is not sufficient in and of itself). More on this later. His second proposition is, “Sweat shirts and jeans are not inherently more conducive to fellowship and ministry than three piece suits and neckties.” At this point, you will have to excuse me. Heretofore, I have been measured, rational, and moderate. But I refuse to be measured, rational, and moderate when one tries to defend neckties. Ladies and gentlemen, if you want to grab hold of a piece of wisdom that will bless you for the rest of your life, please listen to this truth: neckties are of the devil! (I, of course, jest here). I know a brother who calls a necktie a “choking spirit.” I sometimes suspect that he is right. The problem is not merely that the thing is so utterly useless; rather, a necktie is a positive evil relative to church life. It’s very purpose is to choke off intimacy, and establish formality. It is actually written in the code of ethics for lawyers that they have to wear “appropriate” dress, so as not to bring disrepute on the profession. Have you ever seen a lawyer at work without a necktie? The purpose is to establish professionalism. The purpose is to make you think that he is competent, intelligent, and important. It’s purpose is not to make you more intimate with him. How many people do you know that insist on wearing a tie to church, then go home and wear one? They don’t. Why not? Because they are with their family, and they don’t need to be formal with their family. Why do Christians need to be formal with their brothers and sisters? I know of many churches which started wonderfully, and then began to institutionalize. It is inevitable that at some point along the way, the leaders will be told they must wear ties. It is at this point that you may be certain the

church has died, just as you know a patient has died when his EKG shows no brain waves.

A third point is, "To prove that there were no church buildings in the early church is to prove nothing. There were also no automobiles, or telephones, or computers, or printing presses." And, of course, as this old argument runs, there is nothing wrong with cars or phones, they are morally neutral, they can be used for good as well as bad, and so can church buildings. This argument has a surface validity, but it is fallacious. A church building is often not "morally neutral." It is not an adventitious piece of technology that can be used for good or evil. If church buildings are not important, why have Christians sunk 180 billion dollars into building them? If you don't think they are important, go ask a traditional church pastor to sell his church building and give the money to the poor in the name of Jesus, and see what kind of response you'll get. Of all the money Christians faithfully put in the plate, how much of it goes to the gospel, or to the needy, and how much goes to the parking lots, the steeples, the carpets? How many church splits are generated by disputes over the color of carpets, the placement of church furniture, and other momentous issues? Everyone reading this knows as well as I do that the church building today is typically nothing more than a holy shrine, a phony substitute temple for the true temple of God, which is the body of Christ. People don't fight over computers, automobiles, telephones, and printing presses. But they will fight over a church building. Why? Because the church building can easily become an idolatrous object of worship.

His fourth statement is that "What is needed is a change of heart and mind, not of location and surroundings." This argument is one whose foundation rests in super-spirituality. It would work if human beings were airy wraiths who floated through life totally unaffected by their grubby material surroundings. But unfortunately, we humans are very much influenced by our surroundings. Lets take this argument to its logical extreme. Suppose you had a brother who was destitute, jobless, homeless, and miserable. Would you tell him, "Brother, what you need is a change of heart and mind, not a change of location and surroundings!"?

We cannot divorce our attitudes and assumptions from the environmental influences which shape us from a very young age. Thus, if a child attends church his whole life in a church building, he or she will wind up later in life thinking that church buildings hold a holy position in God's eyes as the appropriate place to meet. To say that we should examine our hearts before we examine our church buildings ignores the reciprocal influence that each has on the other.

A fifth assertion the critic is that, "It is just as easy to spawn and perpetuate false teaching, factionalism, groundless ritual, and stifling traditions in a living room as it is in a 'church building'." This is not true. Although false teaching, factionalism, groundless ritual, etc. can easily be spawned in a house, it is not true that they can easily be perpetuated in a living room. Why? Because it takes the living Christ dwelling inside people to keep the church alive without bureaucracy, ritual, and building. And as soon as the life of Christ is replaced by fleshly substitutes, the house church dies, because there is not bureaucracy, ritual, and building to keep it perpetuated. In fact, as human flesh moves in on a house church, you will begin to hear calls for one or more of three things: imported pastors, buildings, and neckties. Why the call for a building? Because human flesh loves illusions of permanence, beauty, and protection. And if Jesus isn't providing those things, fleshly religious people are going to instinctively look to a building for a substitute. This is not to blame the death and fleshiness on the building, but it is to say that the building is the outward sign of the death and fleshiness that is within.

While we're on the subject of church buildings, let's talk about the furniture inside of church buildings. For instance, they line you up so you can fellowship with the back of your brother's or sister's head. Pews don't promote intimacy, but rather cold formality. They also cost a small fortune. Pulpits (lecterns) came from Martin Luther. Luther had been given control of formerly Catholic cathedrals. He was preaching in one of them, needed a place to prop his notes, looked up and saw on a pillar the little rostrum or pulpit that the Catholic priest had climbed up to in order to read weekly announcements. Luther ripped out the old Catholic altar, and replaced it

with the Protestant pulpit. This is used today to make the person standing behind it feel big and important. It is made to awe you, the humble pew-sitter, to keep you from asking questions, and from falling asleep. Its very presence is intimidating to dialogue, communication, and sharing.

An altar in the Old Testament is a place where a sacrifice was slain. The Old Testament foreshadowed the sacrifice of Jesus in the New Testament, so it seems to me that the only “altar” in the New Testament is the cross, upon which Jesus was slain. This, however, does not stop the very many institutional churches who put little padded benches up front and call them “altars.” But, even if they are called “prayer benches,” or something similar, they still reinforce the idea that there’s something going on up front apart from the audience. The altar is just one more piece of religious furniture that reinforces spectator Christianity, the kind that Watchman Nee said engenders “passivity and death.”

So far this critique of church buildings has focused on two main points: their obscene and wasted expense, and their frequent use as idolatrous substitutes for the worship of Christ.

However, there are other reasons we should avoid church buildings like the plague. One reason is that buildings are harmful to church life because they permit the church to grow to such a size that it is impossible to have intimate fellowship anymore. How many times have you heard Christians say, “This was a wonderful church back in the old days when we were small, but now we don’t know anybody.” A house church can never grow that large, because not everyone can fit in the living room. (Which means, incidentally, that for house churches to grow, they must divide and multiply.)

Another reason is that certain normative New Testament practices can’t be accomplished easily in a large church setting. For example, weekly partaking of the Lord’s Supper, taking of the Lord’s Supper with one loaf and one cup, partaking of the Lord’s Feast, and mutual participation and sharing are easily handled in a house church setting, but not so in larger institutional churches.

A third reason not to have a special building is the total absence in the New Testament of instructions to construct such buildings. If we obey the commandment in Deuteronomy 12:32, we must not add to God's word. It is only logical to assume that if God wanted us to have buildings, He would have so ordered in His Word. Consider that all of the gospel and letter writers in the New Testament, with the exception of Luke, formerly participated in temple worship. It is highly significant that not one of them ever built or instructed anyone to build any type of Christian building. This includes Paul, Peter, and John. The absence of special buildings in the New Testament is noteworthy to say the least.

Finally, it has never been the way of God to extend His witness through a building made with the hands of human beings! His method of extending his witness is through the flesh, blood, and bones of the believing body of Jesus Christ, and not a building. The entire book of Acts verifies this doctrinal truth. How much it must grieve the heart of God to watch His body operate in the unsuccessful Jewish method of witness extension: confining the primary energies, ministries, and vision of God to a building. God's commission to His church is to go to the lost in their environment, not invite them into an edifice! We must get out of this inwardly focused building mentality and into real ministry.

— Dan Trotter

## **PART TWO**

Why do we keep insisting that churches ought to meet in people's houses? Won't anywhere else do? A lot of churches that practice in the way we advocate meet in Christian book shops and coffee shops that have a lounge area just like in someone's private house; what's wrong with that? Well, I suppose that in some parts of the world Eskimos might meet in igloos and Red Indians in teepees; and of course on a nice day (and we even get them occasionally here in England too) what possible objection could there be to meeting in the garden (that's the 'yard' to my American readers) or in a field somewhere? And to the above I have no objections

whatsoever, but merely wish to bring us back to the essential point that the format for church gatherings in the New Testament kept each individual church small in numbers, and was therefore simply perfectly suited to everything occurring in people's home. What more, after all, does a biblically based church need for its gatherings than the homes of those who are part of it? And when it comes to biblical churches meeting in lounge areas of book shops and coffee shops – or indeed, in any other public building – there is actually a big problem that will (hopefully) have to eventually be faced, but of which some seem to be completely unaware.

Now it is certainly true that a church could meet in a public building of some kind and still remain small enough in number to function as scripture teaches; and if such a building can be arranged with a nice cozy lounge area and made to feel "like home," then all the better. Indeed, assuming there are kitchen facilities then there isn't even a problem regarding sharing the lovefeast together. But there is a problem to be faced, and a big one too, and it is simply this: A firstgeneration biblical church may well be able to come together and meet in such a way without any problem - but what of the situation once growth occurs and other churches need to come into being from it? (I am assuming that, being biblically based, this imagined church does indeed want to grow numerically, as the Lord enables, and not just remain the same personnel its whole life.) So, do you see the problem? That church can't just keep getting numerically bigger (even though larger numbers can easily be accommodated by virtue of the fact of it meeting in a public building) because it could then no longer function in the way the New Testament teaches that it should, and another church needs to come into existence. And here is the point: Where will that church meet?

Now there may, of course, be an abundant supply of Christian coffee houses and book shops round about with nice lounge and kitchen areas, and so I guess new churches could just go and hire them out; but I still think that an important question remains: Why not just meet in each others houses? I mean, what is the problem with simply doing that? It is, after all, what every

church in scripture did. (Every time individual churches are given a location in the New Testament it is always, and without fail, in someone's home.) So why, oh why, would you want to be different? Why be a church that is biblically based in every other respect, having bought into the notion that we should do things just like they did back then, and then break ranks over this?

Could it possibly be (though surely not) that behind this is a feeling that opening our homes to each other is a bit too inconvenient? Too close for comfort, even? The apostles of Jesus taught believers to open their homes to each other and to actually have their church gatherings in each others homes. After all, am I truly known as I should be if my home-life isn't wide open to those with whom I have fellowship? Can people know me properly, truly and deeply, if they don't regularly see my home life and family life and have it shared with them? Are we really to believe that meeting in homes was a purely incidental aspect of the blueprint for church life we find in scripture, or is it as significant and important as the other aspects such as open, participatory gatherings, having the Lord's Supper as a full meal and practicing biblical leadership and consensual church government? I put it to you that the burden of proof very much lies with those who seem to think it unimportant!

However, let me say too that where homes are literally too small to have more than three or four people visiting at any one time (Tokyo, perhaps?), then by all means make other appropriate provision. The irony is that in the very place where this trend is particularly prevalent, America, homes are very definitely on the large size. (At least they are by our standards here in England where, incidentally, at our church we pack each other into our homes, come what may, even though it means that in some of them, mine included, you can't even see the carpet any more.) So if you are a biblical church meeting in a coffee house somewhere then fine, that sure is better than being an unbiblical church meeting in someone's home. However, do take on board the simple fact that, should you grow and become too large numerically to remain one church any

longer (and as I have already indicated, you should most certainly desire for such to be the case), then how ridiculous to be trying to find more and more Christian coffee houses and the like to rent rather than just locating each church's gatherings in the homes of those who are part of them. How ridiculous as well to end up with a new church gathering in people's homes, whilst the original one continues to meet in the coffee house, or book shop, or public hall, or whatever. Which ever way you look at it, it seems quite illogical to not just do things the way the New Testament churches, under the direction of the apostles, did them. A church can indeed meet in a public building and yet remain truly biblical in every other way as far as practice is concerned. Yet the question remains: When it is quite feasible, all things being equal, to meet in each others homes, and given that this was the universal practice of the New Testament churches as taught and directed by the apostles of Jesus, then why on earth would any otherwise biblical church want to decide not to do likewise?

— Beresford Job

### **PART THREE**

**How can a church keep from wearing out the host family and their home?** Some people really do have the gift of hospitality and wont mind hosting the church every week, but admittedly this can be quite taxing. This is especially a problem if one spouse is out of tune with the other. Typically, the tuned-out spouse (usually a man) will be clueless to the miseries that the other one (usually the wife) is suffering in hosting the church weekly. The solutions are many: church members could come over early to help clean up both before and after the meeting. Perhaps a better alternative is for the meeting location to be rotated on a weekly basis, with all who are able sharing the load. It is good for others to learn hospitality! Further, each home could have its own house "rules", such as: please take off your shoes when entering the house, no children jumping on the furniture, no eating in the living room, etc.

**What if the homes are tiny and just too small for a meeting?** This can be a real problem.

Of course, the houses in China are small, and they still meet in them for church! One alternative is to add on to a home to make the meeting room bigger, or knock out a wall, or close in a garage. If all else fails, renting an apartment clubhouse or some similar arrangement can work, as long as the objective is not to hold more people than could fit into a moderately well to do home.

**How can we keep the neighbors from complaining about the cars?** Rotate the church meeting from week to week between different homes, park only on one side of the street, be sure to fill up the drive way to get as many cars as possible off the street, park at a nearby school or closed store, etc. Remember too that the idea is to start a new church after the existing church starts to get crowded. There should not be all that many cars pulling up!

**What type of property damage can hosting the church cause?** Spilled drinks, food dropped on upholstery, crayon markings on the floor and table cloth, tracked in mud, etc. During one home church meeting a teenage girl ran through a closed sliding glass door. Be mentally and (medically!) prepared for accidents.

**How would you handle a situation where visitor's children, or the children of a newly attending couple, are not well behaved?** Some couples' standards of acceptable social behavior are vastly different from others' standards. It may shock and amaze you at how indifferent some parents are to the destructive actions of their children. In such cases you must calmly, politely, and directly ask them to control their children! And, expect them to be offended no matter how tactfully you approach them. That is just the way it is. Count on this: it will happen. (A helpful book to have on hand to give out is, *To Train Up A Child*, by Michael Pearl. Order it from [www.NoGreaterJoy.Org](http://www.NoGreaterJoy.Org)).

Home meetings are not easier, but they are the New Testament way!

— Steve Atkerson

**7**

**CHILDREN IN CHURCH**

At a Virginia house church conference, before a panel discussion was about to begin, I whispered to a friend that I bet the first question was going to be: “How do we handle the children?” Sure enough, it was. This, in my opinion, is the number one question asked by those contemplating the house church. It is a tremendous stumbling block, but it shouldn’t be. This chapter will examine three things: first, the differing philosophies or mind sets that the institutional and house church have toward children and the church; second, practical issues that arise; and third, the advantage to children of the church in the home.

In an article I once wrote, I asked the question: “What do you do *for* the children?” I am ashamed to say that the first draft of that article read: “What do you do *with* the children?” I had subconsciously succumbed to the philosophy or mind set of much of the institutional church: children are a problem, they interfere with the almighty “service,” where important, paid professionals in robes or coats and ties give important speeches, and where serious, quiet, and holy listeners sit deathly still in pews. So, the question becomes, what do we do with the children while we are doing the important things in the “service”?

Neither Jesus, nor the apostles, ever worried about what to do with the children. Jesus never, ever said: “Suffer the little children to be packed away in the nursery.” Can you imagine the children being led to Children’s Church during the Sermon on the Mount?

The Scripture doesn’t say much on handling children when believers gather. But I can’t imagine that the believers back then didn’t have children. I imagine not much was ever said, because the early Christians didn’t make such a big deal about the issue. The churches were in the home; families lived in homes; children met with the church in the home.

Although the scriptures don’t say anything directly concerning the children and the gatherings of believers, there are glimpses. For example, children are explicitly stated to have been present at the feeding of the five thousand, and the feeding of the four thousand (Mt 14:21, 14:38.). On a missionary journey, “all the disciples and their wives and *children*” accompanied

the apostles, as they left, to pray on the beach (Ac 21:5b). Finally, when Paul's letter was read to the Ephesians, it addresses the children directly: "children, obey your parents in the Lord" (Ep 6:1-2). How could the children hear that exhortation read in church, unless the children were in the church meeting?

And despite the relative Scriptural silence on kids and church, I can guarantee one thing: there weren't any Sunday Schools and Children's Churches. If Sunday Schools are essential adjuncts to church life, why is the Bible silent on this subject? His building plan, the Bible, is complete in every detail. Where is the Christian who would deny that the Bible is a perfect blueprint? Interestingly, there is not even a hint of Sunday Schools in God's blueprint.

Sunday Schools were not even originated to teach Bible stories or Christian morality, but were started in nineteenth century England to give poor children of mill and mine laborers a chance to read and write. Who had primary responsibility for training children before the appearance of Sunday Schools? The family. I think it is the contention of most house churches that the family still has the primary responsibility for the instruction and nurturing of Christian children. That may be the reason most home churches (just like the biblical New Testament church) don't have Sunday Schools. And this really is a barrier to Christians who contemplate leaving the institutional church for the home church. It is amazing how many Christians worry about the spiritual welfare of their kids to the point that the parents will poison themselves to death on the corrupt religiosity of some institutional churches, just so long as there's a good youth program. I am convinced that many institutional churches realize this, and capitalize on it by providing jam-up "youth ministries," in order to keep their "tithing units" from leaving. (Of course, I realize that often there are other, sincere motives involved, too).

Although it is the family's primary duty to raise children up in the Lord, it does not follow that the home church should be uninterested in their welfare. Quite the contrary. If kids see their parents' church as a drag, they'll tend to think Jesus is a drag, too. Thus we must discuss

practical ways for the home church to make children know that the church belongs to them as well as to their parents.

In discussing practical ways to integrate children into the life of the home church, we must understand at the onset that if parents bring the traditional mind set of the institutional church into the house church, nothing will work for the kids. The institutional church has the mentality of juvenile segregation: push them out into the Sunday School wing, so everything can be Holy and Quiet. This, of course, is unbiblical. How quiet do you think the kids were during the Sermon on the Mount? The institutional church is liturgically rigid in its “order of service,” and kids, being as unprogrammed and unpredictable as they are, can never fit within that rigidity. So the first practical thing to do in the church in the home is to relax – there’s going to be more noise and interruption in the house church. People with children need to quit feeling guilty about it, and people without children need to exercise more tolerance than they would in the institutional church.

The second practical thing to do is to develop close relationships between each adult, and between all adults and all children. This development is possible in the home church, in a way that it is not possible in the organized church. With close relationships, when little Johnny is about to flush the cherry bomb down the toilet, an adult who is not Johnny’s parent can firmly request that the little hellion extinguish the wick, without fear of alienating little Johnny or little Johnny’s mom. Close relationships are extremely important.

The third practical thing that should be done is to find creative, workable ways to involve the kids in the meeting with the adults. Where did the idea come from that the meeting (or the church) belongs exclusively to the adults? I know of one house church in which the children are generally musically gifted. The young folks play guitars, violins, and flutes, and feel free to lead out in song or music. Other home churches encourage kids to share testimonies, or to recite memorized scripture, or to ask for prayer requests. During one meeting, my particular home

church allowed the teenage young people to lead the meeting with Scripture and music. The meeting was entirely different – it gave us variety, and helped the young people join in. During another meeting in my home church, one of the sisters conducted a “Sunday School lesson” for the young children with the adults present. The adults were forced to adapt to a young child’s viewpoint (something that all adults should do periodically), and the kids were able to have fun with their parents as they learned the spiritual lesson being taught.

The fourth practical thing I would suggest is not to be hidebound by “house church theology.” Sure, we don’t believe in Sunday Schools, but the world’s not going to end if someone has something special for the kids, or if he takes them aside in another room once in a while. And we don’t believe in pacifying the kids with entertainment to keep them out of our hair, but there’s nothing wrong with showing them a video once in a while (even, heaven forbid, if the video is a Bugs Bunny cartoon, and not spiritual).

A fifth practical suggestion that one house churcher has suggested is for each meeting home to have announced house rules, so that children and parents might not inadvertently harm anything (for instance, “no eating in the living room.”).

A sixth practical suggestion is to tolerate fussing infants as much as you can, but if they get too loud, make sure the parents understand that the baby should be taken out of the meeting until he cools off. If a parent doesn’t do this, the parent should be communicated with. Remember, relationships are important. We need to constantly put ourselves in the shoes of our brothers and sisters – and our kids are, in the body of Christ, our brothers and sisters. Let’s prefer them in love.

My seventh, and last, practical suggestion, is never to let the meeting become boring – neither for the children, nor for the adults. If the meeting is dead or too long for the adults, imagine what its like for the kids! Their attention span is probably about half of ours. We need to constantly put ourselves in the shoes of our brothers and sisters – and our kids are, in the body of Christ, our brothers and sisters. Let’s prefer them in love.

We finish these thoughts on children and the house church by presenting the manifest advantages of the home church for young folks. We should not look upon children as an obstacle to getting folks into the house church. We should look at the advantages of the house church for kids, and point out these advantages to potential house church converts.

One big advantage of the home church for young people is that the youth get to see their parents in loving, supportive relationships with one another. They get to see their parents open their hearts to God in a real, personal, nonreligious, un-phony fashion.

Another tremendous advantage is that the kids are not given second-class status in the church: they are not segregated, put out of sight, out of mind in nurseries, Sunday Schools, and youth ministries.

One of the biggest advantages, in my view, is the close relationships that develop between adults and children of other adults. In my home church, I constantly pray for the children involved. There are only six couples in the church, and only fourteen children. It's very easy to find out what's going on in the kid's lives, and easy to pray for them daily, individually, by name. I submit to you that this doesn't happen very often in the mega-church.

## **CONCLUSION**

I close with a brilliant spoof by Doug Phillips on his church's "Youth Program". Although his church is not living-room sized, his points are still quite relevant:

"I have the privilege of worshiping in a small, family-integrated church. When asked about our various church programs, I explain that we are blessed with more than thirty different organizations to which our members belong - they are called families. I further explain that we have more than sixty youth directors - they are called parents. In fact, we have such a full schedule of events that there is a mandatory activity every day of the week - it is called family worship . . .

As an example to the congregation, the elders are required to be youth directors, too. In

fact, if the elders don't manage their own youth programs well, they have to step down from being elders.

With so much responsibility on their hands, our youth directors have to really get their collective acts together. (I happen to be one of the youth directors, so I speak from personal experience.) They have to study God's Word more than they have ever studied before so they can wisely lead their organization. They have to be creative so they can solve the diverse problems of their special interest groups. They have to learn to be patient. They have to learn to love. They even have to reprioritize their lives.

This last part is crucial. Only by reprioritizing life, and structuring their organizations properly, will our youth directors be successful. They know that. They also know there is a price to pay. But most of them are willing to pay the price, because they have decided that the greatest activity they can do in this life is to be a youth pastor and to run a special interest organization called the Christian family.

Here is what we are discovering: The more we commit to faithfully shepherding our mini-congregations, the more blessing we experience. Moreover, the more we study what God's Word says about these little congregations, the more we see the wonder and the brilliance of God's plan of equipping the Church and transforming the entire culture through these often forgotten, twisted and even maligned organizations called Christian households.”

— Dan Trotter

## **8**

### ***Thoroughly Biblical Church***

What are the irreducible minimum requirements for a church in order for it to be said to be biblical? It was argued earlier in this book that the practices passed on by the apostles have the force of biblical command, and this is true be they, for instance, concerning people working and

providing for themselves and not being idle, or the manner in which churches functioned (such as what they did when they met together.) From the New Testament as a whole we can piece together a clear picture of just what this apostolically commanded church practice actually was:

- Believers met as churches on the first day of the week. (It is instructive to note at this point that this is the only apostolic practice that the early church fathers didn't mess around with and change. The reason for this is that it doesn't in any way touch on the actual nature of what a church is, and therefore didn't affect the wrong teachings and changes to church practice they introduced one way or the other. They therefore left this one thing unchanged and it remained as the apostles had originally established.)

- When churches came together they met in houses.

- When they came together in their houses their corporate worship and sharing together was completely open and spontaneous (1 Corinthians 14:26 describes the proceedings as, "each one has"), with no one leading from the front. The early believers didn't have anything that even approximated a church service.

- As part of these proceedings they ate the Lord's Supper as a full meal, indeed as their main meal of the day, commonly referring to it as the love-feast.

- They understood each church to be an extended family unit (the idea of churches being institutions or organizations would have been totally alien to them), and practiced nonhierarchical plural male leadership that had arisen from within the church they would subsequently lead. This indigenous eldership (elder, pastor/ shepherd, bishop/overseer being synonymous terms in the New Testament) sought to lead consensually wherever possible, and was understood to be purely functional and not in any way positional.

The Bible clearly reveals how the apostles, who were the recipients of Jesus' full revelation and teachings, established churches to operate and function. The question before us is this: How much of their blueprint can be changed yet still leave a church fundamentally biblical in its nature

and functioning. (I use this phrase because nature and functioning are interrelated, being actually different sides of the same coin. As in the rest of life, form follows function and is just the way things unalterably are! Parents and children, for instance, function together differently than colleagues at the work place, and it's the difference in nature that makes the difference in function so important. A family where parents and children relate together more like workmates than blood relatives would be an example not of a normal family, but a dysfunctional one. So likewise, churches that function as institutions or organizations, rather than extended families of the Lord's people, are examples of dysfunctional churches and not, biblically speaking, normal ones.) So let us proceed in earnest to the answering of the question we posed, and see what parts of the apostolic blueprint, if any, are non-essential in maintaining both the nature and functioning of a biblical church. We'll start with the issue of which day churches ought to meet.

Now as far as nature and function are concerned this is indeed entirely neutral, and as I pointed out formerly, the early church fathers realized this and so saw no need to make changes. They knew that you could alter the functioning and nature of churches without reference to the day on which they met, and so in that regard left things as apostolic status quo. Conversely, a biblical church could change the day on which it met yet remain everything it already was, and continue to practice and function in the same manner in every other respect. I would be the first to say that being (nature) and doing (function) church biblically is more important than the day on which you meet in order to so be and do, and would rather be part of a church that was biblical in practice and function but which met midweek, than one that met on Sundays but which wasn't biblical according to our earlier definition. But here is my question: When even the early church fathers themselves chose not to change the day of the gathering of believers, on what basis, and for what possible reason, ought we? I repeat though that I do accept without reservation that a church meeting on a different day of the week to Sunday can be otherwise fully biblical. Further, if it ever became illegal to meet on Sundays, but not Thursday, then I would probably, under such

circumstances, be quite happy to make the necessary changes. But outside of such extenuating circumstances, why change the day on which the early church, under the guidance and care of the apostles, met?

At this point let me just answer the legitimate point that in the world of the New Testament the Jews started a new day in the evening, which means that the first day of the week for them started on our Saturday evening. Therefore, if any church met on Saturday evenings specifically for that reason, then I would accept it as a biblical thing to do. However, it must still be said that this would seem to be illogical in countries where each day is reckoned to commence in the morning. For most of us the first day of the week is the time period from when we get up on Sunday morning until we go to bed again, so I would still maintain that meeting as churches on Sundays remains the biblical norm as far as we are concerned. Further, the verse in Acts 20 which gives us the information about the churches meeting on the first day of the week is written by a Gentile (Luke) concerning a Gentile situation (Troas), and it is unlikely that he would therefore be thinking in terms of the Jewish way of reckoning a day. But let's move on now to the question of meeting in houses.

That the early church did meet in houses no one with an ounce of Bible knowledge is going to deny. The nature and functioning of the meetings they had when believers came together as a church simply meant that there was never any need for them to do otherwise. Numbers in each church were, by definition, supposed to be small; and their interactive gatherings, with no one leading from the front (the New Testament church didn't have anything even vaguely resembling a church service), and with a meal thrown in for good measure, were just perfect for a house setting. After all, what better place could there possibly be? And so once again we see form following function, as it always does in the New Testament. (The eventual move from houses into specially sanctified religious buildings was, as with all the other changes we are considering, down to the early church fathers. It is interesting to note as well that this was the final change

they made to the apostolic blueprint, and that meeting in houses was actually the original apostolic practice that survived their reinvention of the Christian church the longest.)

But let us now consider the plight of twenty Eskimos in a village some where near the North Pole who have just become Christians, and who therefore want to become a church, but whose largest igloo can only fit eight people in it. Now if they therefore decided to hire a slightly larger igloo with the express purpose of using it for their gatherings as a church, then assuming they still meet as the Bible describes, and don't therefore change the nature of what their gathering together ought to be, then I would see no problem. Indeed, I would rather be part of a biblical church that met outside of homes for their main gathering - assuming though that the other biblical practices were in place - than part of a church that met in homes but which was unbiblical in every other respect. You can, if you really have to, maintain the nature and functioning of a church whilst meeting somewhere other than in a home. Indeed, the church of which I am a part used to sometimes utilize a rented hall for the bit of our gathering together that included the singing, this being out of love for neighbors when we heard of their complaints about the noise. But we sat in a circle, just as if in a home, and what we did in that hall was completely open with everyone free to spontaneously take part, and without anyone leading from the front. And when we were done we returned to one of our houses for the love-feast. (Owing to now having more houses to rotate around this is no longer a problem and it is some years since we have needed to utilize a hall.)

But let me underline what I just said about if you really have to; because we must make sure that we don't let deviations from the biblical norm, permissible only because of extenuating circumstances, actually become the norm. Let me illustrate what I mean by this from what the Bible teaches about baptism.

Biblical baptism, like the apostolic tradition concerning the way a church functions, is a command from the Lord. And although its actual mode isn't anywhere commanded in the pages of scripture, we know from the way the early church did it (apostolic tradition again) that it was

to be done upon conversion, with no time lapse, and in water. (And of course the immersion bit we get from the simple fact that the actual word "baptism" in English is simply a transliteration of the Greek word baptizo which literally means to dip, dunk or immerse.) And many of us would be greatly concerned at any idea that we are free to make changes to this, whether regarding who is to be baptized, the mode of their baptism or it's timing; and remain painfully aware of how the church at large has massacred baptism in each of these ways for far too long. So our position would be that, in order to comply with the teaching of the Word of God, a person should be baptized upon profession of faith in Jesus, as soon as possible, and by full immersion in water. Let us now address an instance of someone coming to the Lord who is bedridden because of disability. Baptism, as biblically commanded and exemplified in the New Testament, is clearly out of the question as far as they are concerned, so would not coming up with some other more appropriate mode (sprinkling???) therefore be incumbent upon us? And of course we would respond to this in the affirmative! In such a circumstance one would technically be out of step with the teaching of scripture as to the mode of baptism, yet still be in complete harmony with its intent and spirit. But here is the vital point: Nothing of what I have just said could possibly apply to the conversion of an able bodied person, and the normal mode would need to be employed in order for things to be as the Lord wants. And neither could anyone argue for baptism for someone who hadn't responded to Jesus by faith, because that would attack the very nature of baptism, even though its external mode might still in accordance with the scripture.

This is what I mean when I say we must not make biblically permitted deviations, necessitated because of extenuating circumstances, become the norm. If the church of which I am a part had access to the size of houses that similar churches have, for instance, in America, then we would never even have thought of using a hall for part of our gathering together. (The neighbors obviously wouldn't hear the singing from a detached house separated from next door by a large piece of land and so the need to appease them would never have arisen.) And if we

return for one moment to our postulated brothers and sisters at the North Pole, should it turn out that they do have igloos big enough to fit a good number of people in after all, then what possible need would they have of hiring a large public building-type igloo for their church gatherings?

Of course the truth of the matter is that any process of negotiating away any of these factors, which together make a church biblical, is usually a lead up to attempts at smuggling in alternatives to the other three things I listed:

- Open worship and sharing with no one leading from the front
- The Lord's Supper as a full meal
- Non-hierarchical plural male indigenous leadership

Let me make it quite clear that with what we have said about meeting in houses, plus the above three things, we are indeed now looking at the non-negotiable and irreducible bare minimum requirements for a church to be said to be biblical. But let me make it clear as well that I do not by this mean that everything has to be in place from the word go. There is often, and frequently, the need for instruction, development and spiritual growth first. Yet it still remains the case that these things must be at least where a church is heading for, it's destination so to speak, even if it has not yet arrived there. Of course the Lord's Supper as a full meal ought to be in place from the very start as there is just no possible reason for such not to be the case, but eldership, for example, would normatively arise much later. And it is often the case as well that someone might take an initial lead in the corporate weekly gatherings until the others learn how to begin playing their part. But the thing to grasp is that it should nevertheless be quite clear where the church was heading in regards to how it functions and goes about things.

The issue here is ultimately that anything that touches on these things does indeed impact on the very nature of what a church is. Change things here and you cause a church to begin functioning in a way that is not only different from what the New Testament reveals, but completely alien to it. Indeed, virtually it's opposite! To return to our example of baptism, we

might say that here we have an equivalent to baptizing an unbeliever. The very nature of the thing is changed and the Lord's intention for it made void and cancelled out. Indeed, it is virtually done away with! It boils down to this: Why would anyone who understands these last three parts of the blueprint want to play around with the first two (meeting on Sundays in houses) in any case, unless there were the most pressing of extenuating circumstances forcing them into it? I have yet to hear it put better than by my good friend Steve Atkerson, "The question is not so much why we should do things the same way the apostles did; but rather, why would we want to do anything differently?"

I rather think that says it all!

— Beresford Job

## **9**

### ***THE MINISTRY OF ELDERS***

It was argued earlier in this book that the ideal is government by the consensus of the whole church, and that churches should be elder-led more so than elder-ruled. If this really is the case, then why are elders needed in the church? What function do they serve?

### **THE ADVANTAGE OF HAVING ELDERS**

During the Battle of Midway (World War II), a lone American torpedo air squadron discovered and attacked the Japanese flotilla. Tragically, the squadron attacked without fighter escort. It proved suicidal. All but one of the airmen were killed. Elders are to the church what the fighters would have been to the bombers: protection. Elders offer protection from savage wolves in sheep's clothing. They also provide direction, and teaching, and help the church to achieve consensus and to grow into maturity.

Regarding false teachers, the elders must be able to "refute" those who oppose sound doctrine (Tit 1:9). Yet even this should ultimately follow the checks and balances process of Matthew 18:15-35 (Christian discipline). Elders must not be guilty of "lording it over those

entrusted” to their care, but instead be “examples to the flock” (1Pe 5:3). Having a plurality of elders (all of whom have equal authority) also tends to prevent any modern-day Diotrophes from arising (3Jn 9-10). However, despite any church’s best efforts, we need to realize that “even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard!” (Ac 20:30-31).

Based on such texts as Acts 20:25-31, Titus 1:9, Ephesians 4:11-13, 1 Timothy 1:3, 3:4-5, 5:17, 6:20, 2 Timothy 1:13-14, 2:2, 15, 3:16-17, 4:2-4, Titus 1:9, 13, 2:15 and Hebrews 13:17, the function that leaders are to serve in the church becomes clear. Leaders are to guard and protect against false teachers, train other leaders in apostolic tradition, lead by example, guard the truth, beat off wolves, and help achieve consensus. To sum up, church leaders are men of mature character who oversee, teach, protect, equip, and encourage the church. Further, every now and then they will need to call on the obstinate to “submit” (Heb 13:17) to their leadership.

Though they were technically apostolic workers, Timothy and Titus clearly functioned as substitute elders until permanent local elders were appointed. Thus, the elders that they appointed could be expected to do the same types of things that the temporary apostolic workers did on the local level (1Ti 1:3, 4:11, 5:17, 6:17, Tit 1:12-13, 2:15, 3:10). From this it is clear that it is proper for elders, in exercising leadership, to authoritatively reprove, speak, teach, and guide. Elders are to “rule well” and “oversee” the churches, taking the initiative in prompting and guarding. As mature believers, their understanding of what constitutes right or wrong behavior and doctrine will most probably be correct. They naturally will often be among the first to detect and deal with problems. However, if those they confront refuse to listen, the elder’s only recourse is to then present the matter to the whole church in accordance with the Matthew 18 process.

Authority, ultimately, still rests with the church corporately.

There is a delicate balance to be reached between the leading role of elders and the *ekklesia* responsibilities of the church as a whole. Too far one way and you set up a pope. Too far the

other and you have a ship with no rudder. In essence, both arguments for the leadership of the elders and for the corporate responsibility of the entire church are valid. These need to both be emphasized. On one hand, you have elders leading by example, guiding with teaching and by moderating the give-and-take discussion of the assembly. On the other hand, you have the flock. The church corporately makes the final decision, yet they are exhorted to follow their elders and to allow themselves to be persuaded by their leaders' arguments. Elders' words have weight only to the extent that the people give it to them. Elders deserve honor due to the position God has placed them in. This idea is somewhat similar to the way elders were respected in Israelite towns throughout the Old Testament. They did not have any actual authority or power, but they sure did accord a great deal of respect. To not listen to the wisdom of an elder was tantamount to calling yourself a fool and a rebel.

#### **ELDER-LED CONSENSUS**

All are agreed that the Lord Jesus is the head of the church (Col 1:15-20). Thus, the church ultimately is a dictatorship (or theocracy) ruled by Christ through His written word and the influence of the Holy Spirit (Jn 14:25-27; 16:12-15; Ac 2:42; Ep 2:19-22; 1Ti 3:14-15). Once we follow the organizational flow chart down from the head, where does the line of authority go? In speaking to the "elders" of the Ephesian church (Ac 20:17), Paul said, "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God which He bought with His own blood" (20:28). The presence of the terms "overseers" and "shepherds" certainly suggests a supervisory position for elders. When writing to Timothy about the qualifications for an elder, Paul asked, "If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?" (1Ti 3:5). This again implies a management role for elders. Peter asked the elders to "be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers" (1Pe 5:2). Once more elders are painted in a leadership mode. 1 Timothy 5:17 refers to elders who "direct the affairs of the church well." 1 Thessalonians

5:12 asks the brothers to respect those “who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you.” Hebrews 13:7 commands, “Remember your leaders.” Following that, Hebrews 13:17 reads, “Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account.” All of this indicates that there are to be human “leaders” in the church. These leaders are most often referred to as “elders” or “overseers.”

(As to the difference between an elder, overseer (“bishop” in the KJV), and pastor (shepherd), an examination of Acts 20:17, 28-30, Titus 1:5-7, and 1 Peter 5:1-3 will show the synonymous usage of the words. All three refer to the same office. Any modern distinction between them is purely artificial and without Scriptural warrant.)

The above references to “rule” by overseers could, if taken in isolation, easily lead to a wrong view of how elder rule should operate. There is more to the equation. Consider the steps of church discipline in Matthew 18:15-17 as it relates to a church’s decision making process (see also 1Co 5:1-5; Ga 6:1). Notice that the whole congregation seems to be involved in the decision to exercise discipline. Notice also that the leaders are not especially singled out to screen the cases before they reach the open meeting nor to carry out the disciplining. It is a congregational decision.

This corporate process is also glimpsed in Acts 1:15-26. The apostle Peter placed the burden for finding a replacement for Judas upon the church as a whole. In Acts 6:1-6, the apostles turned to “all the disciples” (6:2) and asked them to choose administrators for the church’s welfare system. Both these examples point to congregational involvement.

Paul wrote to “all” (1:7) the saints in Rome, and made no special mention of the elders. The letters to the Corinthians were addressed to the entire “church” (1Co 1:2, and 2Co 1:1). Again there was no emphasis on the overseers. The greeting in Galatians 1:2 focuses on the “churches” in Galatia. The message was not first filtered through the leaders. The “Saints in Ephesus” (1:1) were the recipients of that letter. In Philippians 1:1 the saints were given equal billing with the

overseers and deacons. In Colossians 1:2, the salutation went to “the holy and faithful brothers in Christ.” All of this implies that the elders were themselves also sheep. The elders were a subset of the church as a whole. There was no clergy/laity distinction.

This lack of emphasis on the leadership is also seen in 1 Thessalonians 1:1; 2 Thessalonians 1:1; James 1:1; 1 Peter 1:1; 2 Peter 1:1; 1 John 2:1, 7, and Jude 1:1. In fact, the book of Hebrews was written to a subgroup of believers and it was not until the very last chapter that the author asked them to “greet all your leaders” (13:24). He did not even greet the leaders directly! In Hebrews 13:17, believers are encouraged to “obey” church leaders. Interestingly, the Greek behind “obey” is not the regular Greek word for “obey.” Instead, *peitho* is used, which literally means “to persuade” or “to convince.” Thus, Hebrews 13:17 should be rendered “let yourselves be persuaded by.” This same verse also instructs believers to “submit” to the authority of their church leaders. As with “obey,” the common Greek word for “submit” is not used. Instead, *hupеiko* was chosen by the author, a word that still does mean “to give in, to yield”, but after a fight. It was used of combatants. The idea behind *hupеiko* is seen in Southern General Robert E. Lee’s letter to his troops concerning their surrender at Appomadox: “After four years of arduous service, marked by unsurpassed courage and fortitude, the Army of Northern Virginia has been compelled to yield to overwhelming numbers and resources.”

Thus, God’s flock is to be open to being “persuaded by” (*peitho*) its shepherds. In the course of on-going discussion and teaching the flock is to be “convinced by” (*peitho*) its leaders. Mindless slave-like obedience is rarely the relationship pictured in the New Testament between elders and the church. However, there will be those times when someone or some few in the flock can’t be persuaded of something and an impasse will arise. When necessary to break the grid-lock, the dissenters are to “give in to, to yield to” (*hupеiko*) the wisdom of the church leaders.

Much may be gleaned from the way that New Testament writers made appeals directly to

entire churches. They went to great lengths to influence ordinary “rank and file” believers. The apostles did not simply bark orders and issue injunctions (as a military commander might do). Instead, they treated other believers as equals and appealed directly to them as such. No doubt local church leaders led in much the same way. Their primary authority lay in their ability to influence. The respect they were given was honestly earned. It was the opposite of military authority wherein soldiers respect the rank but not necessarily the man.

Hebrews 13:7 reflects the fact that the leadership “style” employed by church leaders is primarily one of direction by example: “Remember your leaders . . . Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.” Along this same line, 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 reveals that leaders are to be respected, not because of automatically inferred authority of rank, but because of the value of their service – “Hold them in highest regard in love because of their work.” Jesus said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave” (Mt 20:25-28).

The word “church” in the New Testament is used to refer to the universal church, city-wide churches, and house churches. No organized church should be any bigger than a single congregation, and no church has official jurisdiction or authority over any other church (though there naturally will be inter-church co-operation and assistance). Each house church is ideally to be guided by its own elder(s). Each elder is equal in authority to all the other elders in the city (there is to be no “senior” pastor nor presiding bishop over a city). A leader’s primary authority is based on his ability to persuade with the truth. He is to lead by example, not “lording it over” the church. Church polity is thus a dynamic process of interaction, persuasion, and right timing between the shepherds and the sheep.

Jesus’ comments on leadership truly must be the starting point and final reference in our

understanding of an elder's authority. Hal Miller has insightfully observed, "Jesus' disturbing teaching about authority among his followers contrasts their experience of it with every other society. The kings of the Gentiles, he said, lord it over their subjects and make that appear good by calling themselves "benefactors." They exercise their power and try (more or less successfully) to make people think that it is for their own good. But it should never be so in the church. There, on the contrary, the one who leads is as a slave and the one who rules is as the youngest (Lk 22:24-27). Lest this lose its impact, you should stop to reflect that the youngest and the slaves are precisely those without authority in our normal sense of the word. Yet this is what leadership among Jesus' people is like."

### **THE APPOINTMENT OF ELDERS**

How should elders be appointed? Paul required all potential overseers to be able to meet a lengthy list of requirements (1Ti 3:1-7; Tit 1:5-9). That a man is willing and able to be an elder is obviously the work of the Holy Spirit (Ac 20:28). Once these prerequisites are met, the would-be elder is then appointed. In Ac 14:23 Paul and Barnabas apparently did the appointing, and Titus was left in Crete by Paul to appoint elders (Tit 1:5). As Nee observed, "they merely established as elders those whom the Holy Spirit had already made overseers in the church" (*The Normal Christian Church Life*, p. 41).

After the apostles (missionaries/church planters) appointed elders and moved on, there is virtual silence as to how subsequent elders were or ought to be chosen. Operating from the principle of Acts 1:15-26 & 6:1-6, one could be led to conclude that the succeeding elders were chosen by the whole congregation (following the requirements laid out in 1 Timothy 3:1-7), under the leadership of the existing elders, and under the advisement of any itinerant ministers that have earned the right to be heard by that local congregation.

### **THE PRESBYTERY**

Is there supposed to be one elder per church, several elders per church, or several churches

per elder? In Acts 14:23, Paul and Barnabas “appointed elders in each church”. The biblical evidence seems to support a plurality of elders in every church. However, a bit of confusion arises over the New Testament pattern of having a plurality of elders per church. The New Testament often speaks as if there is only one church per city! For instance, Acts 8:1 mentions “the church at Jerusalem,” Paul wrote to “the church of God in Corinth” (1Co 1:2) and to “the church of the Thessalonians” (1Th 1:1). Jesus told John to write to “the” church in Smyrna, “the” church in Pergamum, etc. (Re 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14). Thus, Scripturally speaking, there is but one church in Atlanta, one in London, one in Moscow, etc.

In contrast, when referring to large geographical areas, the Bible generally uses the word “churches” (in the plural). For example, the Bible makes mention of “the churches in the provinces of Asia” (1Co 16:19), “the Macedonian churches” (2Co 8:1), “the churches of Galatia” (Ga 1:1), “the churches of Judea” (Ga 1:22), etc. Thus, there is no such thing in the New Testament as an organized national church, nor an organized regional church. The only positive reason for division among churches is geographic location. Mention is made, of course, of the universal church (Ep 1:22-23; 3:10, 21; 5:23-32; Col 1:18) to which all believers of all time belong, but the universal church is invisible and spiritual, with no universal earthly organization. An examination of the New Testament will reveal that, though all churches were united under Christ as head, there was no outward ecclesiastical organization uniting them. Though cooperating voluntarily together, each church was autonomous. There was a strong inward bond, a spiritual oneness of life in the Lord. Though independent of outward government, they were interdependent in responsibility to one another (see 2Co 8-9). As there is philosophically one church universal, so there is philosophically one church per city. And, as the universal church is an abstract reality with no outward organization, so too the city church is an abstract reality, without outward organization.

Finally, as a subset of the one unstructured city-wide church, there were numerous organized

churches that met in various homes within each city (Ro 16:5; 1Co 16:19; Phm 2; Col 4:15). The relationship between the various house churches is similar to the relationship between the various city churches: all are united under Christ as Head, but there is to be no outward ecclesiastical organization uniting them. All are to co-operate together in an attitude of inter-dependence, yet each remain autonomous.

So, did the plurality of elders serve the city-wide church as a whole, or only individual house churches? That elders worked together is clear from Philippians 1:1, 1 Timothy 4:14 and Titus 1:5. Yet it would be a mistake to conclude that they collectively were “over” multiple churches as some sort of ruling presbytery. Since any elder’s authority lies primarily in his ability to persuade with the truth, and since any respect due him is earned via personal interaction, there is no way a presbytery of elders could minister “over” a group of churches anyhow. Ideally, each house church should have its own elder(s). In those transitional situations where a house church has no one qualified to be an elder, temporary leadership could be sought from a respected apostle, an elder in a nearby church, or itinerant pastor-teacher. The New Testament pattern is for each house church to be led by a body of equal brothers (some of whom are elders), depending upon one another, accountable to one another, submitting to one another, and living out a mutuality in ministry.

## **CONCLUSION**

Harvey Bluedorn wrote an excellent biblical summary of the ministry and authority of elders:

**1. The New Testament Standard** — As the pattern of things shown to Moses established the standards for the tabernacle (Ex 25:9,40; 26:30; 39:42,43; Ac 7:44; Heb 8:5), and as the pattern of things shown to David established the standards for the temple (1Ch 28:11-13,19), so the pattern of things shown in the New Testament establishes the standards for the assembly, the temple of God (1Co 3:9,16,17; 6:19,20; 2Co 6:16; Ep 2:21,22; 4:13-16; 1Ti

3:15; 1Pe 2:5,9; Re 1:6; 3:12; 5:10; 20:6).

**2. Servant Leaders** — Leaders are a functional necessity for the assembly. The Lord Jesus raises up men from among the members of the body, and equips them to meet stated qualifications. They will inevitably emerge from among the membership and become apparent to the assembly, and the assembly must formally recognize the Lord's calling in those whom the Lord has truly gifted and qualified to serve as guides, teachers, and examples to the whole body. Such servants are called elders and overseers, or shepherds and teachers (Tit 1:5, Ep 4:11).

**3. Multiple Elders** — A plural number of elders will ordinarily emerge from the membership of an assembly (Ac 14:23), although in a newly formed assembly it may require some time to pass before the Lord fully equips and qualifies elders (Lk 12:42; 1Co 4:2; 1Ti 3:6,10; 5:22; Tit 1:5; Heb 5:12,13). Among the pastor-elders there are some who especially toil in discourse and teaching (Ep 4:11; 1Th 5:12,13; 1Ti 5:17).

**4. Decisions by Full Agreement** — Decisions are made by the full agreement of the assembly, as represented in the men of the assembly, under the advise and counsel of their servants, the elders. Presumably, the men may, by full agreement, delegate certain on-the-spot-type decisions to someone, including to elders, but they must always reserve the right to make the decision themselves, or to determine the policy for such decisions, and they must require of those to whom they delegate decisions a full report and accountability to the assembly.

**5. Elders are Servants, Not Lords** — The Word of Christ rules by His Spirit in the midst of His people, through the regenerate hearts and renewed minds of the members of the assembly as He brings them to complete mutual agreement, unanimous accord, or consensus. Elders lead by the moral authority of a servant who provides word and example, and who commands respect for what he gives, not for what he requires. Elders do not rule as independent

authorities. Their role is advisory and supervisory, not the lordly authority of command and conform. Elders are instrumental, through their leadership, teaching, and example, in bringing about consensus in the assembly, but all authority rests in Christ alone. All members - including elders - submit to the Lord, then to one another in the Lord - including elder members, who submit to other members, including to other elder members. In other words, there is no chain of command - God, then Christ, then elders, then members - but only a network of submission, and elders have the greatest burden of submission and accountability because they are servants to the whole assembly. Only those who humble themselves to the level of servants before the Lord and His assembly may be raised to this level of accountability. By the nature of the case, those who would exalt themselves to a position of authority over all, have necessarily disqualified themselves from a position of service.

**6. The Saints are Kings and Priests** — It is a severe violation of the adult conscience to treat the saints as children under the over-lordship of elders. The ultimate effect of treating the saints as children is that they will either remain children in their understanding as they submit to bondage, or they will rebel. Elders exercise appropriate authority as fathers within their own households, but their role in the assembly is not as fathers and lords over children and servants, but as elder brothers in the faith and humble servants to the whole.

**7. A Deliberative Assembly** — The gathered assembly is a deliberative body. The men (adult males) in the assembly are encouraged to interact in an orderly manner with the reading, exhortation, and teaching in the assembly, regardless of what form that interaction assumes - informative lecture, thoughtful consideration and discussion of propositions of Scripture, logical debate of different sides of a question, or consultation on practical issues. This is not a "Quaker-like" meeting of "whenever-the-spirit-leads," nor is it a "familyfriendly-style" meeting of token affirmations by heads of household, nor is it a "worshipcentered" meeting of lively entertainment, but it is a genuine discipleship learning process

which edifies and brings the whole assembly to maturity in Christ through the interaction of the men of the assembly.

**8. Independent Congregational Accountability** — Each congregation constitutes its own communion and is independently accountable to the Lord, but all true congregations exist within the same spiritual kingdom, they depend upon the same Lord, and they cooperate as much as circumstances require and allow, both on the level of individual persons and on a congregational level. There should be no ungodly jealousy between brother believers, nor between sister assemblies.

— Steve Atkerson

## **10**

### **WHAT IS A MINISTER?**

I have been pointedly wrestling with issues related to Christ's church since 1972. Some matters have crystallized in my thinking, and I would like to share them with you in hopes that meaningful dialogue and serious searching of the Scriptures might take place. We have nothing to fear by looking at the Scriptures together.

The key burden on my heart that I would like to express and develop is this: the ministry of the church as a whole will continue to be crippled as long as we perpetuate the separation of "the minister" from the New Testament vision of eldership, and as long as we functionally divide God's people into "ordained" (clergy) and "uncalled" (laity).

### **ELDERS INSTEAD OF "MINISTERS"**

The New Testament knows only of "saints, bishops and deacons" (Php 1:1). "Bishops," "pastors" and "elders" all refer to the same body of men (Ac 20:17, 28). The oversight of the church is conceived of as a body of elders (1Ti 5:17; Jam 5:14). However, the traditional practice of "calling a pastor" separates this "office" from eldership at virtually every point. Under the New Testament pattern, *laos* (people) and *kleron* (clergy, inheritance) refer to *all* of God's

people; hence, elders and deacons are part of the “laity/clergy,” not separate from or above it. “Most denominational churches have departed from this pattern by distinguishing between the pastor and the elders. Common practice makes the pastor a full-time employee of the church, while the elders are laymen who function much like a board of directors” (James Stahr, *Interest*, April, 1984, p. 2).

In the traditional Protestant pattern, the pastor has a “call” that the other elders do not possess, the pastor is trained differently than the elders, the pastor is ordained in a different way than elders, the pastor comes from outside the body whereas the elders come from within the body, the pastor can be led to another church whereas the elders are resident, the pastor can have “Rev” next to his name but not so elders, the pastor is paid to carry out various duties (but not the elders), texts that apply to a *body* of elders are applied to “the minister” only, the pastor can occupy the pulpit while the elders rarely (if ever) can, and the pastor determines the direction of the worship service. Interestingly, the traditional Protestant way of doing things actually parallels a non-gospel religious model (with priests and witch doctors) more than it does the simple New Testament pattern.

#### **THE SHIFT FROM ELDERSHIP/MUTUAL MINISTRY TO “THE MINISTRY”**

No matter what area of church truth I study, it seems that the ultimate source of the problem somehow works itself back to the isolation of “the pastor” from the eldership. The frustrating thing to me is this: even though the best scholarship in Bible study and church history is united in the basic conclusion that “ethical guidance for people recently converted to Christianity . . . was offered at first by a polyform ministry of grace, reflected in the New Testament; but as time went by moral authority was increasingly focused in an ordered ministry of bishops and deacons,” those who take this perspective seriously are labeled as “off the wall,” “unsound,” and “dangerous” (the quotation is from G.W. Forell, *History of Christian Ethics*, Vol.1, 1979, p.39; cf. “One God, One Bishop: The Politics of Monotheism,” *The Gnostic Gospels*, Elaine Pagels,

1981, pp.33-56).

Given the fact that in the New Testament we are confronted with a “polyform ministry of grace,” must we not ask ourselves if the decided shift to the focus on “the ministry” (clergy), which occurred quickly in post-apostolic times, was valid or invalid? Judging by our *practice* we give more credence to the post-apostolic tradition than we do to the direct apostolic teaching (cf. Judy Schindler, “The Rise of One Bishop Rule in the Early Church,” *ST*, Summer, 1981, pp. 3-9),

### **WILL THE REAL “CLERGY” PLEASE STAND UP?**

If we take the New Testament seriously, anything that promotes the traditional “clergy/laity” categories must be stopped. Are those in “the pastorate” willing to renounce the title “Reverend” next to their name (cf. David Foster, “Call No Man Teacher, Father, Rabbi....Or Pastor?,” *Journal of Pastoral Care*, Jay Adams, ed.)? The whole mystique that surrounds “the pastor” must be brought into line with Christ’s statement to the *apostles*: “you are all brethren.” Making unbiblical distinctions among ourselves results in some awful traditions, as the following illustration shows: “It was doubtless with assurance born of the reverence with which he was customarily regarded, that by stamping upon the meeting-house doorway floor [John] Smalley made known to his congregation the moment of his arrival, so that members of importance might rise and make him their obeisance as he passed down the center aisle on Sabbath morning” (Mary L. Gambrell, *Ministerial Training in 18th Century New England*, pp.113-114). We may not duplicate this particular obeisance, but the spirit of this illustration is still repeated a thousand different ways in our day.

### **PREACHING: IN THE STREET OR IN THE “SANCTUARY”?**

Attached to the institution of “the pastor” is the central duty of preaching. H.M. Carson states that preaching “is the main means by which the people of God are built up in the faith” (*Hallelujah! Christian Worship*, p.72). But it appears that “preaching” in the New Testament is primarily an activity that took place *outside* church meetings (cf. Stuart Olyott, “What Is

Evangelism?," *Banner of Truth*, July/August, 1969, pp.1ff.; C.E. Dawson, "The Evangelicals," *Gospel Tidings*, Sept., 1982, p.247). The church must be devoted to apostolic teaching. The elders may often provide the backbone of such instruction in the assembly. But to equate the reign of Christ's word in the church with the pulpit ministry of "the pastor" cannot be substantiated from the New Testament. It would be wonderful for those with preaching gifts to exercise them "outdoors," as did George Whitefield. It needs to be remembered that the whole rationale for the "centrality of preaching" is suspect: it arose in a state-church where church attendance was compulsory.

#### **"THE BODY IS NOT ONE MEMBER, BUT MANY"**

One of the most damaging spin-offs that comes with separating "the pastor" from the eldership is the *neglect of the total body*. When it is posited that "the whole weight of the order, rule, and edification of the church" rests on "the pastor," as the Puritan John Owen suggested, there is no way that proper attention can be given to the "whole body" perspective in Ephesians 4:16. J.I. Packer freely admits that the Puritan discussion of gifts "was dominated by their interest in the ordained ministry . . . and questions about other gifts to other persons were rarely raised" ("*The Puritans and Spiritual Gifts*," *1967 Westminster Papers*, p.15).

#### **WHERE'S THE NEXT MINISTER'S CONFERENCE?**

"The ministry" as separated from the eldership also puts incredible pressure on gifted people that they were never meant to bear. Articles from *Christianity Today* illustrate the obvious: "How Many Hats Does Your Pastor Wear?," "Clergy Divorce Spills Over Into the Aisles," "Who Counsels Ministers When *They* Have Problems?" Since pastors are always "giving out," and because local churches are unable and unequipped to minister to them, they must go away periodically to conferences attended by those in the same syndrome. Because the New Testament knows nothing of a "pastoral office" as traditionally conceived, it is no wonder that those in it experience "burn-out" in trying to measure up to its expectations. Life-fracturing issues like

nervous breakdowns, suicide, divorce, incredible family stress, and sexual infidelity are especially high among the clergy. A recent *Focus On the Family* intensive survey indicated that 1800 pastors leave the ministry *per month* in our country among all denominations. When are we going to wake up and realize that there is something rotten in the state of Denmark?

### **MINISTRY: PULPIT OR POLYFORM?**

The pastoral institution has probably been the most formative factor in the shape that church services take (see Hezekiah Harvey, *The Pastor*, 1879 [Backus Books, 1982], pp. 27-28). The earliest assemblies knew nothing of a “pulpit,” and yet it has become an article of furniture you dare not question. It is a parallel situation to many who just assume that the apostles gave “altar calls” in the first century. *Scholarship from all traditions* acknowledge that in the New Testament we are met with *structured informality*. Note these few examples of many that could be given:

- 1 Corinthians 14:26-36 “provides a glimpse of the early church at worship. The service apparently contained a mixture of spontaneous flexibility and traditional formality inherited from the synagogue. Congregational participation is suggested by the words” [of 14:26] (William Baird, *1 Corinthians/2 Corinthians*, 1980, p. 59).
- “In Paul’s day the worship service probably was more open than are today’s services” (Leonard J. Coppes, *Are Five Points Enough?*, p. 182)
- “The glimpses we have of worshipping congregations in the New Testament are of active participants” (Herbert Carson, *Hallelujah!*, p. 29).

Urgent questions arise: in light of our confession that the New Testament is to guide us, why are our meetings entirely different than those revealed in Scripture? Is it right for us to eliminate participation in order to maintain the “centrality of preaching”? Why were such meetings edifying and good for the early church, but “dangerous” for us? Is the Spirit informing us in the New Testament, or do we posit that this inspired information is no longer relevant?

One argument often ushered forth is that 1 Corinthians 14 is “early revelation” and is modified by “later revelation.” But this is specious reasoning on several accounts. First, what is there in the “later” revelation that *contradicts* 1 Corinthians 14? Second, Hebrews is “later revelation,” yet it contains the same emphasis found in Corinthians: “exhort one another daily . . . do not forsake your assembling . . . but encourage one another.” Third, James is “later,” yet some commentators see 1:19 as a reference “to the free and unstructured worship of early Christian assemblies” (Curtis Vaughn, *James: A Study Guide*, p. 35; cf. Earl Kelly, *James: A Primer for Christian Living*, p. 69).

If we are honest, we must confess that the pulpit-tradition is a huge obstacle that blocks obedience to the one-another, participatory dimension of body-life found in the New Testament. David Thomas (in 1898!) summarized the situation well: “The Christian church in assembly, on the same occasion, might have several speakers to address them . . . . If this be so: 1. Should Christian teaching be regarded as a *profession*? It is now: men are brought up in it, trained for it, and live by it, as architects, lawyers, doctors . . . . 2. Is the Christian church justified in confining its attention to the *ministry of one man*? In most modern congregations there are some Christian men who, by natural ability, by experimental knowledge and inspiration, are far more qualified to instruct and comfort the people than their professional and stated minister. Surely official preaching has no authority, either in Scripture, reason, or experience, and it must come to an end sooner or later. Every Christian man should be a preacher. Were the half-hour allotted in church services for the sermon to be occupied by three or four Christly men . . . with the capability of expression withal, it would not only be far more interesting, but more profitably spent than now (“1 Corinthians,” *The Pulpit Commentary*, p. 459).

### **BUT WHAT ABOUT MY PAYCHECK?**

People in the ministry can feel threatened by the implications of New Testament eldership.

The traditional rationale for supporting a pastor is without Scriptural warrant, and is based on

misinterpreted texts. But 1 Timothy 5:17-18 indicates that a congregation is free to help any of its elders, as it is able. As with all the other points connected to “the pastorate,” support needs to be put in the context of a body of elders, not in connection with an imagined “pastoral office” (cf. Ronald Hock, *The Social Context of Paul’s Ministry: Tentmaking & Apostleship*, Fortress, 1980). Financial help is not to be a motive in elders serving the flock; the assembly is free to help elders; elders are free to work with their own hands (1Pe 5:2; 1Ti 5:17; Ac 20:34-35).

### **WHERE’S THE EVIDENCE?**

If “the pastor” is such an important cog in church ministry, then why is it so hard to validate such a function in the New Testament? John H. Yoder pointedly summarizes the data: “The most striking conclusion to be drawn from this enumeration is the absence of two offices which are most characteristic of modern Christianity: the ‘pastor,’ in the sense of one professional minister leading a congregation, and the ‘bishop,’ in the sense of a minister with authority over several congregations. Both of these terms were originally interchangeable with that of ‘elder,’ referring to one of several men who shared the leadership in a local council. Henri d’Espines, professor of Calvin’s own Geneva University, drew the same conclusion, and has dared to say that Calvin’s view of the pastoral office is un-biblical, that ‘this state of affairs is deplorable,’ and that ‘the restoration of the collective pastorate, exercised by a veritable council of elders, is one of the primary conditions of the spiritual renewal which our churches need.’ Once again, we see Reformed Biblicism at its best coming out in favor of the authority of the Scripture over the church” (“Biblicism and the Church,” *Concern #2*, 1955, p. 45).

### **ARE YOU SEEING SOME LIGHT?**

If you are or have in the past been in the “clergy” role, and you are coming to the conviction that this position originates from unscriptural traditions, there are some practical steps that must be taken on your part.

- Stop using “Reverend” and other religious titles in connection with your name (and encourage

those around you to cease using language that assumes the “clergy/laity” distinction).

- Renounce your “clergy” status and see yourself as part of the “laos” of God who has manifestations of the Spirit, along with everybody else, for the good of the body (1Co 12:7).
- Teach the body that your “clergy” role and all the expectations that go with it are based on human traditions and not the Gospel.
- Instruct the brethren that all aspects of caring for one another rest with the body, not on some spiritual elite.
- Take concrete steps to de-centralize the function of your gifts in the body.
- Begin a new methodology of truth-seeking and truth-speaking. Instead of “clergy” spoonfeeding the “laity,” study important issues *together* from the Word with a view toward finding Christ’s will and acting upon it.
- Adopt a teaching style where dialogue occurs and questions/insights from others are encouraged.
- As the body makes concrete changes in the way “church” is done, the emphasis shifts from dependency on one person to edifying multiple participation.
- Your financial support as a clergy person is admittedly a difficult issue, but needs to be Scripturally and creatively evaluated. Regardless of all the specific circumstances in your case, if it will help the assembly develop its one-another ministries, you at least need to be *willing* to follow Paul’s example: “You yourselves know that these hands [by tentmaking] ministered to my own needs and those of others with me. In everything I have pointed out to you that, by working in this way diligently, we ought to support the weak” (Ac 20:33-35). As ministry becomes increasingly shared in the body, it takes the load off one person and frees the congregation to evaluate how its financial resources can be maximized for edification and meeting people’s needs.

The “clergy” system is a mammoth institution. Its tentacles reach deep into the inner workings of almost every religious group. Not every “clergy” person takes the New Testament

seriously, but those who do need to lead the way by personal example to a paradigm shift which better reflects Christ-centered assembly life. People who withdraw from the traditional “clergy” model out of faithfulness to Christ will usually have a heavy price to pay, but the spiritual rewards are beyond description. The truth is, remaining in a system that has crushed and ruined many people’s lives is the wrong price to pay. Why do you suppose 1800 people a month are leaving “the ministry”?

**“WE BELIEVE THE BIBLE IS OUR INFALLIBLE RULE OF FAITH AND PRACTICE”**

Many churches make this confession, but do they really take the New Testament seriously enough to evaluate all of their practices in light of it? Such a confession becomes very hollow if it is not backed up by honest hermeneutics and sincere obedience. I’m tired of hearing preachers yell, “If we can’t find it in the Bible, we won’t believe it or do it.” Scripture will not support a host of things that go on unquestioned in churches, yet pastors and those in the pew will become livid if their sacred cows are challenged.

I am submitting my understanding of Scripture to the body of Christ. If you believe I am mistaken, please sharpen me with Scripture. On the other hand, if I have articulated things that are worthy of further reflection, then please follow through on the implications. Are you willing either to come up with the goods (from Scripture) to justify the status quo, or change your thinking and practice in light of the Word?

Below are some books that have helped me in the areas discussed above.

- Campenhausen, Hans von. *Ecclesiastical Authority & Spiritual Power in the Church of the First Three Centuries*, Stanford Univ. Press, 1969.
- Davies, J.G. *The Early Christian Church*, Baker, 1981.
- Goppelt, Leonhard. *Apostolic & Post-Apostolic Times*, Baker, 1980.
- Grudem, Wayne. *The Gift of Prophecy in 1 Corinthians*. Univ Press of America, 1982.
- Hanson, Anthony. *The Pioneer Ministry: The Relation of Church & Ministry*. Westminster,

1961.

•Lindsay, Thomas M. *The Church & the Ministry in the Early Centuries*. James Family Pub.,

1977.

•Niebuhr, H. Richard. *The Ministry in Historical Perspectives*, Harper & Row, 1983.

•Warkentin, Marjorie. *Ordination: A Biblical-Historical View*. Eerdmans, 1982.

— Jon Zens

## **11**

### **FULL TIME MINISTRIES**

Famous are the words of Jesus, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” Not so familiar is the context in which this truth was recorded. Jesus’ words are not found in any of the four Gospels. These words of Jesus were quoted by the apostle Paul while speaking at a pastor’s conference (Ac 20:32-35). Amazingly, Paul was instructing pastors to be in the position of *giving* silver, gold and clothing to the church, rather than receiving such from it!

### **ACTS 20**

In light of what Jesus said, should pastors earn their living from the church? In Acts 20, Paul gave the Ephesian elders specific instructions on their duty as elders. Concerning finances, Paul stated that he had coveted no one’s silver or gold and that he had, in fact, paid his own way by “working hard” (20:34-35) with his hands (compare 18:1ff). Following Paul’s example, the elders were also to earn their living from a secular job so as to be able to help the weak and live out the words of the Lord Jesus that it is more blessed to give than to receive. Thus, from Acts 20:32-35 it is clear that elders are generally to be in the financial position of giving to the church, not receiving from it.

### **1 CORINTHIANS 9**

But what of 1 Corinthians 9:14 where it is stated that those who proclaim the gospel should “receive their living from the gospel”? We can observe from 1 Corinthians 9 that at least three

groups made their livings from their ministries during New Testament times: apostles (9:1-6), the Lord's brothers (9:5) and evangelists (9:14). According to Paul, various factors combined to justify this truth:

1. A "human point of view" (soldier, vineyard keeper, shepherd).
2. The "Law of Moses" (oxen, temple priests).
3. Spiritual principle/logic (spiritual seed/material harvest), 9:11.
4. The words of Jesus, 9:14.

From a merely "human point of view" (9:8) Paul asked: "Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat of its grapes? Who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk?" (9:7). The answer is obvious. All make their livings from their work, and so should apostles/church planters/missionaries.

Then, from the "Law" (9:8), Paul derived the same truth: "Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain" (9:9). Applied to apostles, Paul asked "Is it about oxen that God is concerned? Surely he says this for us, doesn't he?" (9:9-10). If oxen can eat from what they do, so can apostles! Then in 9:13, Paul brought in the example of Old Testament priests, asking, "Don't you know that those who work in the temple get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in what is offered on the altar?" (9:13).

Third, this *senus plenior* ("fuller sense") that the Holy Spirit inspired Paul to see in the Law concerning oxen led Paul to derive this spiritual principle: "If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you?" (9:11). Paul concluded that this "right of support" should thus be his "all the more" (9:12).

Paul's final line of defense was found in the words of the Lord who "commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel" (9:14). If it was true for evangelists, it is true of apostles, too.

1 Corinthians 9 specifically concerns the rights of an apostle, someone commissioned by

either Jesus or the church to travel around evangelizing and establishing churches (the word “missionary” is never used in Scripture; such people were called “apostles” and “evangelists”). As is clear from the text, all such people have the “right” (9:12) to financial support. Is it wrong to apply this passage to elders? Since Paul waived his apostolic “right” to get his “living” from the gospel (9:15, 18), the example he showed the Ephesian elders seems all the more compelling (see also 1Th 2:9; 2Th 3:7-9).

Oddly, after writing convincingly of the right of apostles in 1 Corinthians 9, Paul then added, “But I have not used any of these rights. And I am not writing this in the hope that you will do such things for me.” (1Co 9:15). Since Paul did not write this in order the hope that the Corinthians would give him support (1Co 9:15), then why did he write this? Amazingly, 1 Corinthians 9 is essentially a parenthetical remark! Paul’s main topic began in 1 Corinthians 8 and concerned not being a stumbling block to others (re: food sacrificed to idols, 8:9). Paul’s waver of his “right” to full-time support (1Co 9) illustrated just how far Paul was willing to go to so as to “not hinder the gospel” (9:12b, 15). Then, in 1 Corinthians 10, Paul continued on with his main topic, concluding with “Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God” (1Co 10:31-32). Thus, Paul’s objective in writing 1 Corinthians 9 was neither to limit nor extend the categories of those who had the “right” to support from the church. It was merely an illustration. As such, it reveals that Paul had a very liberal approach to supporting church workers (“Is it about oxen that God is concerned?” and “If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you?”).

It is true that 1 Corinthians 9 deals specifically with the rights of an apostle, not an elder.

But, based on the principles expressed in 1 Corinthians 9, would it be committing the unpardonable sin for an elder to make his living from the church? Based on solely on Acts 20, it would seem that pastors (elders) will generally not receive full time financial support for their ministries. However, Acts 20 is not the only passage dealing with this subject! 1 Corinthians 9

(above) must be factored in, as must 1 Timothy 5 (below).

## 1 TIMOTHY 5

Temporarily stationed in Ephesus was Timothy, Paul's traveling companion and fellow apostle (1Th 1:1; 2:6), whom Paul left there to squelch strange doctrines (1Ti 1:3). Concerning the same Ephesian elders as in Acts 20, Paul wrote that elders who did a good job directing the affairs of the church and who worked hard at "preaching and teaching" were worthy of something called "double honor" (1Ti 5:17). Then, using almost the exact same reasoning as in 1 Corinthians 9:9, 1 Timothy 5:18 states, "For the Scripture says, 'Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain,' and 'The worker deserves his wages.'" This parallel should not be minimized. The implications are clear.

But does "honor" mean "pay?" No. From the Greek word *time*, it primarily means "respect". There is a specific Greek word for "pay" (*misthos*) and, significantly, it is used in 1 Timothy 5:18 (about employees), but not in 1 Timothy 5:17 (about elders). *Time* can in certain contexts mean "price," but since a "price" is the quantity of one thing that is demanded in sale for another, it hardly makes sense in this passage (are elders for sale?). This same word (*time*) is also used immediately following in 1 Timothy 6:1, "All who are under the yoke of slavery should consider their masters worthy of full respect (*time*)". Are slaves to "pay" their masters? One practical application of this "honor" is that an accusation brought against an elder is not to be received unless it is substantiated by more than one witness (1Ti 5:19). 1 Timothy 5:19 logically follows 5:17-18 if "honor" refers to "respect" (an "accusation" involves dishonor), but follows awkwardly if "honor" refers to "pay." A good parallel verse is 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13, wherein the church in Thessalonica was asked to "respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work."

However, *time* is also used immediately prior to the passage about elders. In 1 Timothy 5:3

“honor” is to be given to widows who are really in need (the NIV renders it as “proper recognition”). This occurrence of *time* obviously means granting the widow more than respect! Giving the widow food, helping her with her house and yard work, visiting her, offering her living quarters if needed, and of course even monetary assistance, is the idea. “Honor” was also clearly understood by Jesus to refer to material support in Mark 7:10. The Law of Moses required, “Honor your father and your mother”. Unhappy with the religious leaders of Judaism, Jesus said, “But you say that if a man says to his father or mother: ‘Whatever help you might otherwise have received by me is Corban’ (that is, a gift devoted to God), then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother. Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down” (Mk 7:11-13). Thus, it is within the realm of possibility that in some cases “honor” to an elder might include giving him a love offering, an honorarium.

So why did Paul use *time* (“honor”) instead of *misthos* (“wages) in 1 Timothy 5:17?

Perhaps because the elder’s relationship to the church is not to be as a hireling. Nor is he to “charge” for his services. Jonathan Campbell has wisely stated, “There is a difference between being paid to do a job and being released to do a work.” Concerning voluntary giving (an honorarium) versus a salaried position, Dan Trotter has warned, “The widows of 1 Timothy 5:3-16 weren't earning a salary, they were receiving charity. And "the laborer is worthy of his hire" quote in Luke 10 referred obviously not to disciples receiving a salary or wages, but hospitality (eat and drink what's set before you, etc.). The word "wages" in the Old Testament quotation (1Ti 5:18) is obviously metaphorical (just like the unmuzzled ox eating straw is metaphorical). If you push that metaphor too far, we'll have Christian workers eating straw! Another example of the metaphorical use of "wages" is where Paul wrote to the Corinthians that he had robbed other churches so as not to accept wages from Corinthians. Vines states that the word "wages" in 2 Corinthians 11:8 is clearly metaphorical, which, of course, it is. I don't think its anybody's business to complain if a Christian worker (whether apostle, prophet, elder, teacher, or whatever)

receives voluntary offerings from anybody for whatever reason. But the minute a salary or wages is paid, the principle of voluntary giving of service to the body is violated, the principle of clergyless Christianity is violated, the priesthood of all believers is violated, etc. I'm not getting on that train, because its heading over the cliff. The number one stench in the institutional church is money, plain and simple. It is an abomination, a disgrace not only to God, but to the human race. And once we open the door with a hireling clergy, we are finished. In conclusion, if Paul had meant "double wages" in I Timothy 5:17, why didn't he say "double *misthos*," or "double *opsonion*", two perfectly clear words which mean "wages" and would have conveyed what he meant? And if he meant wages, why didn't the early church follow his example?"

London elder Beresford Job comments, "I think it unlikely that there would be much need for anyone to be a full time elder unless they also had a ministry wider than just to the house church of which they are a part. It is significant that when Paul addresses this issue when he wrote to Timothy he assumes that any elders who might need some kind of support were precisely those engaged in preaching and teaching, which would lead me to believe he is referring to people who were among the evangelists and pastor-teachers who, with apostles and prophets, comprised the fourfold trans-local ministries of Ephesians 4:11. I therefore conclude that there are men who are called to share themselves out amongst more than one church who won't necessarily have time to do a secular job as well. Assuming they aren't millionaires, or have a business that supports them and which functions pretty much without needing their attention, they are going to have to be funded from elsewhere.

However, the apparent contradiction we seem to have in scripture is that although the laborer is indeed worthy of his hire (such men have bills to pay and families to support too), ministry is nevertheless free of charge and we see nothing whatsoever in the New Testament of salaried positions. Indeed, the idea of churches 'employing' someone is perfectly at odds with the teaching of the New Testament as a whole. So let me put it to you that what we have here is that

if someone feels called to a ministry which prohibits them the time to earn money from other employment, then they can well trust the Lord to provide their needs. It will, of course, be through the freewill offerings of the Lord's people, but nothing must be done by the one called into full time service to ever procure money because that would transgress scriptural teaching that all ministry is free of charge.

For myself I have been in full-time ministry for 25 years and don't charge money, don't take collections, have never requested that collections be taken on my behalf, have never mentioned expenses incurred, never sent out a prayer letter or made needs known to others in any way. I finance everything I do myself and simply respond to whatever I believe the Lord would have me do, whether it's driving locally to teach or buying plane tickets for myself and my wife and daughter to come over to the States to do various things as invited. And this I do knowing that if I work free of charge then the Lord will provide for myself and my family in answer to prayer. I call it 'living by faith properly' as opposed to 'living by faith - and hints and prayer letters and collections'."

## **1 PETER 5**

What did Peter mean in 1 Peter 5:2 when he exhorted the elders to shepherd God's flock voluntarily and not "for sordid gain"? "Sordid gain" is from a single Greek word, *aischrokerdos*. *Aischros* means "shame, disgrace" and *kerdos* means "gain, profit, advantages." A related term, *aischrokerdes*, is used in Titus 1:7 where elders are required not to be "fond of sordid gain." 1 Timothy 3:3 parallels this with a requirement that elders be free from the "love of money." Thus, *aischrokerdes* is a virtual synonym for being "greedy for money." One idea is that of R.C.H. Lenski (*The Interpretation of the Epistles of St. Peter*, 219), who points out that since elders were usually bi-vocational, Peter's warning was that elders not use their position to seek the trade of the church in business matters. (How many businessmen have joined "First Church" primarily to climb the social and economic ladder?). Peter's warning also suggests that money did

occasionally go along with the ministry of elder, and being “in it for the money” was not a good reason to be an elder! Yet another way to look at Peter’s words is to see them as a caution for the elder to be willing to forgo potentially lucrative business ventures and instead give his time to serving as an elder.

## **SYNTHESIS**

First, Jesus commanded that those who preach the gospel (evangelists) should make their living from the gospel. Paul, in an illustration, applied this same principle to apostles (1Co 9). Finally, it was applied to qualified elders (1Ti 5), using the same arguments found in 1 Corinthians 9. Acts 20 is addressed to elders in general. In general, elders are to be bi-vocational and will thus be in a position of giving monetarily to the church, rather than receiving from it. The exception to this generalization is 1 Timothy 5, written with reference to those elders who not only “rule well” but who also “labor in the word and doctrine” (NKJV). Though all elders are worthy of honor (1Th 5:12-13), some elders are worthy of double honor. This “double” honor most likely is a reference to financial support from the church. And, regardless of how an elder earns income (secular or sacred), he is to give generously to the needy. Blending Acts 20 with 1 Timothy 5 would also suggest that even those elders worthy of double honor (financial support) be willing and trained to work some secular vocation if local conditions require it (i.e., times of economic depression, poverty-stricken third world countries, very small churches, etc).

## **CAUTIONS**

1. Suggesting that the church is obligated to support those elders deemed worthy of “double honor” does not mean that these elders are somehow higher in rank than the other elders. One elder may be more gifted than another, or more influential, but there is no such thing in the New Testament as an official “senior” elder, nor of a hierarchy of elders.
2. To be avoided are elders (especially those worthy of double honor) who dominate the 1 Corinthians 14 meeting. If an elder receives financial support that enables him to study the Word,

it's possible that he will have so much more to teach, and be expected to do so, that the other brothers won't feel as free to teach. That would squelch the priesthood of believers and violate 1 Corinthians 14:26. Such meetings are not to be pastor-centered. Instead, a gifted elder's in-depth teachings could come during a midweek Bible study or apostolic-type meeting.

3. The “pastor-teacher” mentioned in Ephesians 4 is not somehow “over” all the churches of a city. Instead, he is the servant to all the churches of the city. As Beresford Job would say, there is to be no “big cheese” in charge.

4. Despite the evidence that qualified elders may make their livings from their ministries, there is to be no clergy-laity distinction. Authority resides in the church as a whole, not with its leaders. The leaders are to be humble servants, not lords. Rusty Entrekin warns: “Although we know that pastor-teachers are supposed to be servants and not in a special ‘clergy’ class, those who are not pastor-teachers will still have a tendency to regard them that way, especially because of our modern institutional church mind-set regarding professional pastors. Even if the pastor teacher doesn't think that way about himself initially, if he doesn't watch himself, he could very easily begin to gradually, perhaps imperceptibly, adopt that mind-set. Since the godly, sincere, and vibrant believers of the late first century and early second century church fell victim to this mind set, just think of how easily we could today with the peer pressure of conventional “wisdom,” centuries of traditions, and lukewarm spirituality encouraging us to do so! We need to be very careful not only to guard against the priesthood being robbed of their God-given rights, but also to exhort them not to give their rights away.”

## **CONCLUSION**

What can be concluded about the idea of full-time church workers?

1. There is no historical pattern in the New Testament either for or against full-time elders. It is silent.
2. There is a general command in Acts 20 for elders to follow Paul's example of supplying their

own needs so as to be in a position of giving silver and gold and clothing to the church, rather than receiving from it.

3. All elders are worthy of honor (esteem), 1 Thessalonians 5.

4. Qualified elders, those who rule and teach well, are worthy of “double honor” (financial support, 1Ti 5).

5. Elders are not to be motivated by the desire for “sordid gain” from their ministry (i.e., not just in it for the money, nor using the office to gain sales contacts or clients), 1 Peter 5.

6. We need to financially support those who are evangelists, apostles, teachers and elders, 1 Corinthians 9. It is the New Testament pattern to give to support people, not property. Give your money toward areas that God thinks are important.

— Steve Atkerson

## **12**

### ***EVANGELISM***

We consider the last words of an individual to be of utmost importance. Family members will crowd around a dying man’s bed to catch his last words and then recall them again and again for years to come. Well, I suggest that the last words of Jesus Christ before He ascended to heaven were of utmost importance. He gives them to us in all four gospel accounts and in the book of Acts.

**Matthew 28:18-20:** “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

**Mark 16:15-16:** “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned.”

**Luke 24:46-48:** “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and rise again from the dead the third day; and that repentance for forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witness of these things. And behold I am sending forth the promise of My Father upon you; but you are to stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.”

**John 20:21:** “Peace be with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you.”

**Acts 1:8:** “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.”

Notice that in every case Jesus emphasizes the responsibility of the apostles to extend His kingdom. They are to make disciples of all the nations, preach the gospel to all creation, proclaim repentance for forgiveness of sins to all the nations, be sent by Jesus Christ just as He was sent by His Father, and be witnesses to the remotest part of the earth. Jesus gives the same basic message in five different ways in order that the apostles would have no doubt as to what their job was after He left. He left these words ringing in their ears. He had one thing He wanted to impress indelibly on their minds. It was as if He was saying, “If you forget everything else I’ve taught you, you must never forget this!” These texts form the marching orders for the Church until Christ returns.

Those of us who meet in home churches must deal responsibly with these final words of Jesus Christ. Theoretically, we should have an advantage over those who meet in more traditional settings. Since we do not typically use our money to hire a pastor or pay for a mortgage on a building, we should have all the finances necessary to do the work of evangelism in our city. Additionally, the house church model is much easier to reproduce than the traditional church. In order to plant another house church we don’t need to hire a seminary trained individual, and build a special religious edifice complete with cross, stained glass windows,

pulpit, pews and organ. All we really need to plant a house church is a handful of people who love Jesus Christ and want to follow Him together. On the other hand, the whole dynamic of a house church can work against the command of Christ to reach out with His gospel. Often, when someone comes into a house church they enjoy the rich and intimate fellowship with other believers so much, that they tend to focus on that to the neglect of equally important matters, like evangelism, discipleship and church planting. However, we must not let that happen to us. Our churches must not only have an inward nurturing thrust. They must also have an outward missionary thrust.

Too often the church has a fortress mentality. We see the power of Satan and his demons, and wanting to protect ourselves from the power and pollution of sin, we retreat and cloister together in fear. However, instead of finding ourselves on the defensive, we ought to be on the offensive! Jesus said that the gates of Hades would not overpower His church (Mt 16:18). In this passage the church is on the offensive, and hell is on the defensive! I understand Jesus to mean that as the church boldly, and aggressively invades Satan's kingdom with the gospel of Jesus Christ, the devil will not be able to successfully oppose our onslaught. We will prevail. We have the power and authority to invade the kingdom of darkness with the truth of the gospel, and hell can't stop us. Let this truth from the lips of Christ encourage and embolden you to new evangelistic exploits!

If all this is true, how should our house churches engage in the task of reaching the lost and planting new churches? Let's take a look at where and how the early church evangelized to get some direction for our own churches.

#### **WHERE DID THE EARLY CHURCH EVANGELIZE?**

Often churches today seek to evangelize by inviting non-Christians to one of their meetings. A popular approach is to gear the Sunday church service towards non-Christians by having professional music and drama, and practical messages directed towards the nonbeliever in areas

such as finances, stress, work, and family. It is hoped that unbelievers will be attracted to Christ through such means. After they have been converted, they are encouraged to attend a Bible study during the week where they can grow in their faith. However, the New Testament approach is almost completely opposite. Instead of inviting the lost to church meetings, most New Testament evangelism took place during the week as believers came into contact with unbelievers, or as apostolic workers proclaimed Christ in public places. Church meetings were designed for the edification of believers, not the conversion of unbelievers (1Co 14:3, 5, 12, 17, 26). Of course, on occasion unbelievers did attend church meetings (1Co 14:24-25), but the meetings were not designed for them, but rather the strengthening of the church. It seems that the Biblical model is to proclaim Christ to others as the Lord provides opportunity for our witness, and when someone comes to faith in Christ, to then invite them to begin meeting with other believers in our corporate gatherings.

#### **HOW DID THE EARLY CHURCH EVANGELIZE?**

The early church took Jesus' words at face value and sought to obey them. They did so in two different ways. Speaking in broad, general categories, apostles (church planters) and evangelists sought to reach those they did not know through public proclamation, while the other members of the church sought to reach the lost through daily interaction with people they did know. Apostolic workers proclaimed Christ in synagogues, market places, and riversides (Ac 13:5,14; 17:17; 16:13). The rest of the church on the other hand, witnessed primarily through their daily, regular contact with unbelievers. That's why Paul wrote to them and said, "Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity. Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned as it were, with salt, so that you may know how you should respond to each person" (Col 3:5-6). Peter exhorts likewise, "...but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence" (1Pe 3:15). Early church members

were to *respond* to outsiders, and be always ready to make a defense to everyone *who asks*.

These passages seem to indicate that the early Christians usually witnessed to the life transforming power of the gospel to those they already knew (life-style evangelism), whereas the apostles (church planters) took a more aggressive approach in proclaiming Christ to those they did not know.

What implications does this have for how our house churches should reach out to the lost? It means that those in our churches whom God has gifted and called to work in evangelism (evangelists and church planters) will look for venues to present the gospel of Christ to those they don't know. Perhaps they will engage in open air preaching, street evangelism, door to door witnessing, and tract distribution. Perhaps they will be given opportunities to speak at various events and functions. Because I am a bluegrass banjo player I have been given several opportunities to preach the gospel to largely secular audiences at concerts and festivals.

On the other hand, other members of the congregation should be praying and looking for opportunities to speak a word for Christ to those they interact with, like classmates, neighbors, work mates, relatives, customers or other acquaintances. Additionally we need to regularly seek to put ourselves in places where we can interact with non-Christians. We can join a neighborhood watch program, civic group, or square dancing group to meet people. We can open our homes during the holidays and invite our neighbors in. We can invite unbelievers into our homes for dinner. We can start an investigative Bible study for any of our unsaved friends who are open to learning what the Bible has to say. We can ask our unbelieving friends what we can be praying for in their lives. I have been surprised to find out how many of our neighbors were actually lonely people and welcomed a loving friendship. When God gives an opportunity for us to befriend an unbeliever, we need to just be ourselves, and let our light shine. The opportunities abound to love people and thus make an eternal difference in their lives.

In addition, our churches should pray for and give generously to those God has gifted and

called to evangelize and plant churches. The apostle Paul often urged local congregations to pray for him in his evangelistic and church planting labors (Ep 6:19-20; Col 4:3-4). In the texts just cited, Paul is urging believers to pray for him that God would give him boldness to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, and that God would open to him a door for the word that he could speak forth the mystery of Christ. Furthermore, Paul consistently commended those churches who generously gave of their finances to support his evangelistic work (Php 4:14-19; 2Co 8:1-5). Let's pray for and give to those whom God has raised up as evangelists and church planters today.

Out of all the people the church witnesses to, there will be some who God has prepared to receive Christ and be saved. What then? Well, the person who led the individual to Christ, if possible, should begin to disciple them by spending time with them, encouraging them, answering questions they have about how to live for God, and providing an example for them in serving Christ. As God saves new believers we can either add them to the existing church, or begin a new church plant. Since house churches have a built in size limitation (as many as can fit in a house), you will probably start to experience difficulties meeting together when the numbers approach 35 or 40 people. At that point plan to plant a new church! You can plant the new church either by splitting the previous church in two, or hiving off a few people and starting a new church plant, while leaving the previous church pretty much intact. I personally prefer the latter method. When people begin to form strong friendships in a church, it can be traumatic to tear them apart. It may be much less stressful to take a few new believers and a brother gifted in church planting and have them begin meeting in a new location. The church planter can begin to teach these new believers how to function as a church, and how to reach their social circle with the gospel of Christ. Hopefully, over time, God will raise up from these new converts mature brothers who can serve as elders to shepherd the flock. The church planter is now free to devote himself to planting a new church, and so the process begins all over again.

Oh may God stir those of us involved in house churches to labor to fulfill the Great Commission that Jesus might receive glory and His kingdom extend around the world!

— Brian Anderson

*Some believers are supernaturally gifted in evangelism and/or church planting. Their existence and ministry is a New Testament pattern, especially in pioneer areas. However, it does not follow that every new church must be started by a bona fide church planter, else it is not a true New Testament church. While their ministry is a great help in the plant of a new church, it is not essential, particularly in areas where the gospel has already been preached and the church firmly established. — Editor*

**13**

#### **MINISTRY HOUSEHOLDS — KEY TO HEALTHY CHURCHES**

In modern culture we have increasingly come to evaluate virtually everything from an individualistic perspective. We find our identity in ourselves individually, by our individual accomplishments, position, possessions, etc. We increasingly have difficulty relating to the notion that we are part of something bigger than ourselves.

Yet the Bible portrays a very different paradigm. People are to find their identity in being part of a corporate whole: a lineage, a family or, most importantly, the body of Christ. But many of us struggle to apprehend this corporateness. For example, most Westerners have no more than a theoretical understanding of Jesus' claim (Mt 19:6; Mk 10:8) that a husband and wife "are no longer two but one flesh" or Paul's contention (Ro 12:5) that "we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another."

I have always embraced these truths academically. But experientially I couldn't grasp how my wife and I were "one" in more than the most rudimentary sense of physical intimacy. Similarly, most of my church experience has reflected the assumption that the church is a conglomeration of individuals "attending" the same function.

As the Lord is leading many to see the New Testament apostolic pattern of gathering in private homes, I suspect that like me, most bring with them the baggage of their past experience and understanding. But the Lord is apparently restoring the understanding and experience of the corporateness of the body of Christ among many house churches today. He is moving us past a solely theological assent to the truth of unity, to the reality of being experientially "knit together" into a whole that is bigger than its parts.

One way He is doing this is by restoring the foundation of household unity and identity. I theorize that one of the reasons for the homeschool movement (an apparently separate work of God, but one I suspect is linked in God's coordinated purpose) is to prepare households to function unitedly in the church. Historically, as individualism gradually shaped self-perceptions in Western society, the church incrementally lost its awareness of "The Spiritual Power of Ministry Households" (the title of a spoken message from which this chapter springs).

As God deposited in the nineteenth century church the vision for foreign missions, an insidiously destructive seed began to sprout and flourish. Missionary families were concerned about the education of their children. As institutional education became the assumed norm, this created a perceived conflict for many missionaries and the agencies that sent them. Gradually, an educational infrastructure of missionary boarding schools was developed to meet the seeming need. By the twentieth century, it was typical for missionary parents to be separated from their children for extended periods, often beginning at very early ages. As special boarding schools for "missionaries' kids" (MKs) became more common, a tragic phenomenon became increasingly accepted. The children of missionaries were raised as virtual orphans by loving care-givers who did their best. But many of the sons and daughters of foreign missionaries became bitter about the "sacrifices" their parents made. Sadly, today there are numerous accounts of MKs who want nothing to do with the Lord, and blame the church for separating them from their parents during a time when, by God's design, they were supposed to be their parents' *primary* ministry (though not

their *only* ministry).

To this day there are missions agencies that require missionary candidates to commit to enrolling their children in boarding schools. This is not only rationalized as being for the children's good, but also is overtly intended to free up the *individual* parents to minister on the field with less distraction. Missionary couples are thus seen as partners in ministry, more than as a household unit. The sending agency expects to reap the benefit of utilizing two *individual* workers rather than seeing the couple as a single unit.

This not only has a devastating effect on the children, but on the very notion of the household. In fact, it hastens the spread of individualistic presuppositions, undermining what are ironically sometimes more Biblical cultural family mores in the groups being evangelized. The grievous result is that the new churches being planted are presented an unhealthy and unnatural model of family life. They never get to see an example of whole, healthy households in the lives of those who are discipling them. (During my ministry in Asia, I'm afraid I have frequently observed the prevalent fruit of ignoring, excusing, or even praising unfaithfulness in family life among modern Indian and Chinese churches.)

This sad state of affairs isn't unique to foreign missions, however. During the last few generations the church in the West has increasingly seen Christian workers who have so exclusively focused on their ministry that they have neglected their families. While this phenomenon isn't new, it is becoming pervasive in institutional Christianity. The destructive consequences include the poor reputation of PKs ("preachers' kids) and the undermining of examples of godly family life among God's people.

Before proceeding, let me qualify my exhortation with an acknowledgment that the opposite error is also a trap. Just as it is possible for a man to fall into the idolatry of his own ministry, it is also possible to idolize one's family, or the idea of family. We must always love Jesus Himself above anything, whether our ministry for Him or the family He has entrusted to us. Jesus issued

warnings against putting our families above Him (Mt 10:34-37; 12:47-50; 19:29; Mk 10:29-30; Lk 9:59-62; 14:20-26). Yet these scriptures are increasingly used to rationalize an unbiblical neglect of family responsibility. Without neglecting the cautions against inappropriately idolizing family, let's consider what else God's word says about the priority of family ministry, and how it impacts other ministry.

## **GOD LOVES THE FAMILY**

God created families and He expresses His emotions regarding them. In an exceedingly clear expression of his heart, God expresses his passionate feelings about family in Malachi 2:16. "For the LORD God of Israel says That He hates divorce!" I believe God loves the principle of family. He chose family relationships as the dominant metaphor for New Testament Christians' relationship with Him and with one another. Christians become God's children (Jn 1:12; Ro 8:16; 1Jn 3:2) — part of His household (Ep 2:19). Jesus came to, among other things, reveal God as "Father" (Lk 11:2; Jn 1:18, 16:25). The Holy was given to, among other things, reveal God as our "Abba" (Daddy — intimate reference for Father; Ro 8:14; Ga 4:6). One of the most frequently-used identifiers for Christians in the New Testament is the word "brothers" (Mt 23:8; Ac 6:3; 1Pe 1:22; 1Jn 3:14, 16). One of the most beautiful pictures of the relationship between Christ and the church is the relationship of a Bridegroom and his bride (Mt 9:15; Jn 3:29; 2Co 11:2; Re 19:7-9; 21:2, 9; 22:17). While these metaphors are not completely lacking in the Old Testament, they are all vastly expanded in the New Testament. The Lord intends our healthy family relationships to provide these physical pictures for His use in revealing spiritual realities. If the picture is neglected, we lose part of God's intention for this revelation.

In fact, Paul said every family is designed to be a reflection of the Heavenly Father's patriarchy. In Ephesians 3:14-15 He wrote, "For this reason I bow my knees to the Father [Greek: *pater*] of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family [Greek: *patria*] in heaven and earth is named." By His design, families are to be led by fathers and apparently defined by

the patriarchal jurisdiction of fatherhood.

Far from abolishing or even minimizing family, the New Testament reinforces and expands what was introduced regarding family in the Old Testament. One of the Old Testament commands quoted most frequently in the New Testament is the command to "Honor your father and your mother" (Ex. 20:12; Le 19:3; De 5:16; Mt 15:3-9; 19:16-19; Mk 7:6-13; 10:17-19; Lk 18:18-20; Ep 6:2). In their letters, the apostles spent a fair amount of time teaching about family practices (1Co 7; Ep 5:22-6:4; Col 3:18-21; 1Ti 3:2, 4-5, 11-12; 5:4, 8-10, 14, 16; Tit 1:6; 2:3-5; 1Pe 3:1-7; Heb 12:5-11).

### **FAMILY HOSPITALITY**

One of the key practices encouraged in the New Testament is hospitality (Ro 12:13; 1Ti 3:2; Tit 1:8; 1Pe 4:9). It should arouse our suspicion of an underlying problem that this is one of the most blatantly disregarded mandates in the modern church. Hospitality is practiced in a family setting. But if our families are being atomized into fragmented individuals, each with his own independent life to pursue, there is very little potential context for being hospitable.

It is instructive that one of the observable qualifications God instituted for evaluating the qualifications of potential leaders in the church is that they be "hospitable" (1Ti 3:2; Tit 1:8).

When I was a young man, I served as a youth pastor and associate pastor in two different institutional churches (each for over a year) in which I never once stepped inside the home of the acknowledged "senior pastor." In one case, I never even learned where the pastor lived.

I am not completely faulting these sincere men of God who were supposed to be "examples to the flock" (1Pe 5:3) for this shocking disregard of scripture. I was nearly as bad. I figured that the neutral territory of the "church building" was the most appropriate place for fellowship, and that while hospitality was nice, it wasn't essential. Thus there were saints I ministered to who could easily charge me with the same failure. We simply didn't get it!

### **AN ELDER'S FAMILY**

The explicit minimum qualifications for leadership in the body of Christ include other family matters. An elder/bishop (demonstrably the same thing as the pastor in the New Testament church — see *poimaino*, *presbuteros*, and *episkopos* in Ac 2:17, 28; Tit 1:5, 7; 1Pe 5:1-2) was to be "the husband of one wife" (1Ti 3:2; Tit 1:6). There is some controversy, today, over the application of this. Some simply apply this to polygamy, others suspect it precludes divorced and remarried men from being publicly recognized as exemplary, and still others take it to mean that an elder must be a "one woman type of man."

I suspect the requirement of being "the husband of one wife" not only means a man with *more* than one wife is disqualified, but that a man with *less* than one wife also is not qualified to be recognized as a model for the church. While single men certainly have the benefit of fewer distractions and responsibilities, and thus more freedom, this very lack of responsibility is also a handicap when it comes to leading in the church. It is more likely for a single man to be (or at least be perceived as) "a novice," but Paul told Timothy (1Ti 3:6) to choose as elders those who were "not a novice." He further made it clear that the reputation, as well as the reality, of a man's maturity, was important (1Ti 3:7; "he must have a good testimony among those who are outside").

Some time after I married my wife, Connie, I began realizing how unprepared for marriage I had been. I was simply not mature enough for marriage. Yet as I pondered the matter, I concluded that I likely would never have been mature enough for marriage, while I was single. But it seems to me that within months of getting married, I had been stretched in wonderful ways that forced me to mature. I doubt I would ever have grown in those areas as a single man. Marriage made me something I could not have become otherwise. Truly in all but a few cases, "It is not good that man should be alone" (Ge 2:18). There are likely exceptions, but a man who is unmarried (or at least who has never been married) is not as likely in a position to be a thorough and balanced role model for the body of Christ as one who has demonstrated his

capacity to "rule his own house well."

In fact, I suspect that a man who has not experienced fatherhood will be similarly handicapped. Paul told Titus (1:6) to only recognize as elders those men who are "the husband of one wife, *having faithful children*." Just as I was not ready for marriage until after I married, I was not ready for fatherhood until after Connie and I were blessed with our first child. Being a father pressed me in certain ways that I would likely never have matured in without having children. As the Lord continued blessing us with more children, and as each of them was trained through different stages of childhood and youth, I was being further prepared for eldership. The other homeschooling fathers and I, in our local congregation, have theorized that God's reason for leading us to disciple our own children at home rather than sending them to school is not exclusively (perhaps even primarily) for *their* benefit. God has called us to teach our own children at least partly because of the maturity this brings to us as fathers. Any teacher will acknowledge that the teachers learn as much or more than the students, in the process of teaching. In fact, I suspect one of God's primary reasons for raising up the homeschool movement in this generation is to prepare truly qualified elders who have learned how to disciple others as a result of discipling their own sons and daughters.

Sadly, as noted earlier, the children of those who are devoted to ministry in the contemporary church often have the worst reputation. I'm blessed to be a PK myself (not "Promise Keeper," but "Preacher's Kid"). But as a child I learned that the acronym "PK" is often a derogatory term in the contemporary church. While this is not always deserved (many love to find fault in leaders to excuse their own failures), it is too often true that the children of those in public ministry are not examples to the rest of the body of Christ.

I imagine we have all seen men who seem to have a true call of God on their life for public ministry, yet who are so focused on that ministry that they neglect their own family. Paul included, as a qualification for local church leadership, that an elder's children must be well

trained. He defines "one who rules his own house well" (1Ti 3:4) as "having his children in submission with all reverence." Then he reasons (1Ti 3:5), "for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?"

In his instructions to Titus (1:6) he is more explicit in specifying the expectations of the fruit of an elder's fatherhood. He must have "faithful children not accused of dissipation or insubordination." The children of elders must not only be "in submission," but their faithfulness must be so evident that they are not even "accused" of excesses or disobedience.

Obviously elders' children are going to be selfish and inclined to sin, just as all humanity is.

Yet only those men who have proven their capacity to "train up a child in the way he should go" (Pr 22:6) should be publicly recognized as models for the church. The word translated "faithful" in regard to his children (Greek *pistos*) is elsewhere translated "believing." (For example, Jesus used this word as a contrast to Thomas' doubting in John 20:27. See also Ac 10:45; 16:1; 2Co 6:15; 1Ti 4:3, 10, 12; 5:16; 6:2.). It is certainly not a stretch to contend that only men who have trained believing children should be considered for eldership.

Some might point to the examples of Jesus and Paul as unmarried, fatherless men. Such exceptions should certainly motivate us to be cautious in applying the scriptural norm too rigidly. Yet we should also avoid using exceptions to invalidate norms clearly taught in scripture.

Although there are good reasons to conclude Paul was single, some scholars believe he had been married. Even if he was a eunuch, His own Spirit-inspired writing specifies that local church elders (not necessarily itinerant apostles) be "the husband of one wife, having faithful children."

Some might persist by pointing to the other apostles who apparently left their families to follow Jesus. But I suspect we view these accounts through a distorted, modern filter that skews our perception to our own individualistic paradigm. Even the one explicit account (Mk 1:20) of how James and John "left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants," was not likely a dishonoring of their father, in light of Jesus' later extended rebuke (Mk 7:1-13) of the adult

Pharisees of "making the word of God of no effect through your tradition" when they rationalized failure to honor their father and mother. Although arguments from silence are suspect, it is not unlikely that James and John had Zebedee's blessing. This is particularly likely given the fact that their mother also seems to have been one of the women who traveled with Jesus (Mt 20:20; 27:56).

But who were these "many women who followed Jesus from Galilee" (Mt 27:55-56; Mk 15:40-41; Lk 8:1-3; 23:49, 55; 24:10)? Some of them are named ("Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the mother of Zebedee's sons."), but apparently there were many others. It's rather surprising that there is no hint of the pharisees accusing Jesus and the apostles of impropriety, given the "many women" who accompanied them. One possible explanation is that these "many women" may have included the apostles' wives.

Again, some will protest that this is an argument from silence. Yet the contention that the apostles left their wives and children to follow Jesus is only based on inference, as well. Some are arguing that when Jesus commended those who "left house or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands" for His sake and the gospel's (Mk 10:29), He was making this normative. Yet if this were so, it would be in conflict with the rest of His and the apostles' teaching. Clearly "wife and children" are among those we are commanded to "hate" (Lk 14:26) in comparison to our devotion to Jesus. Yet husbands are elsewhere commanded to love their wives (Ep 5:25; Col 3:19).

### **WERE THE APOSTLES MARRIED?**

We know Peter was married, because each of the synoptic gospels reports that Jesus healed "his wife's mother" (Mt 8:14; Mk 1:30; Lk 4:38). Isn't it amazing that other than this single instance, Peter's wife is nowhere mentioned in the Gospels? But the Gospels' silence about this woman can't be taken to imply some lack of activity or devotion on her part. We know that Peter's wife later traveled with him in ministry (1Co 9:15).

In fact, we find that "the other apostles" and "the brothers of the Lord" also traveled with their wives. How many of the other apostles had wives? Paul may be using hyperbole here, but it sounds like he is implying that he, and possibly Barnabas (1Co 9:16) were the only apostles who didn't follow this practice.

We don't know when these "other apostles" married. It is certainly possible it was subsequent to their three and a half years with Jesus, but it isn't necessarily so, just because their wives are not mentioned in the account. We would only conclude this when reading the account filtered through modern paradigms. Today it would seem highly inappropriate to neglect mentioning the apostles' wives. But if it weren't for the single parenthetical comment by Paul, we would have no direct mention of the apostles' wives at all. If it weren't for that statement, many would assume from the scripture's silence that they weren't married. Yet this appears to be a relatively recent paradigm.

What about children? It is likely that the apostles' marriages were blessed with the fruit of the womb. Although their children are not mentioned, any more than their wives are, it is only through contemporary frames of reference that we would use this silence to conclude that such children didn't exist, or travel with their parents. In the Hebrew culture, men were assumed to have a wife and children, with few exceptions.

Evidence of another apostle's wife and children comes from a surprising source. Prior to betraying Jesus, Judas was "numbered among the twelve" apostles (Lk 6:13-16; 22:3). And he was married & had children. After his death Peter told the other disciples (Ac 1:16) there was a "scripture . . . which the Holy Spirit spoke before by the mouth of David concerning Judas." He then went on to quote part of Psalm 109:8, which says, "Let his days be few, And let another take his office." Notice that this Psalm continues speaking of the same person (Ps 109:9-10): "Let his children be fatherless, And his wife a widow. Let his children continually be vagabonds, and beg; Let them seek their bread also from their desolate places." The passage continues talking

about his "fatherless children" and "posterity." And Peter claimed this passage was a scriptural prophecy regarding Judas. Thus, arguably, Judas had a wife and children.

While such indications are not some major theme, I am proposing that we moderns have assumed, from the scriptures' silence regarding the apostles' families, that they only followed Jesus individually. It would be more historically valid, given the cultural context, to assume men were married and had children. I am thus persuaded we should use the relative silence regarding the apostles' families as evidence of their existence and that their whole households were following Jesus.

### **NEW TESTAMENT MINISTRY HOUSEHOLDS**

Not only did most of the apostles have families, but the New Testament alludes, more specifically, to several ministry households. Aquila and Priscilla were a couple devoted to the work of the Lord. The scripture's silence regarding whether or not they also had children as part of their ministry household should not be taken as evidence against the likelihood that they did. Historically it would have been unusual for a couple not to have children, and it would not have been unusual for them to remain unnamed and unmentioned.

The reference (Ac 18:2) to Paul having "found" Aquila in Corinth, may indicate that he was already acquainted with this family, and was looking for him. At any rate, they welcomed him into their household, even apparently allowing him to be part of their household's tent-making business (Ac 18:3). Paul stayed in Corinth a year and a half. When he left for Ephesus, Priscilla and Aquila accompanied him. If they had children, as I suspect is likely, their children would have undoubtedly been part of the household that relocated. Paul only stayed in Ephesus a brief time, intending to return later. But Aquila's household remained in Ephesus (Ac 18:18-19), possibly as a preparation for Paul's anticipated return to that city (verse 21).

During Paul's absence, a man named Apollos began to preach the gospel in the Ephesian synagogue, but his understanding was lacking. So Aquila and Priscilla "took him aside" (Ac

18:26; likely to their own home) "and explained to him the way of God more accurately." Paul later stated (1Ti 2:12) that he did "not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence." How can this be reconciled with the account that Priscilla, as well as Aquila, "explained to [Apollos] the way of God more accurately?"

One solution to this seeming contradiction might be found in the distinction between "explaining" and "teaching." Another might be that Paul's admonition to the silence of women in the church gatherings (1Co 14:34-35) seems to be limited (1Co 14:23) to when "the whole church comes together in one place." It is quite likely (or at least possible) that Paul's admonition against women teaching men is in the same context. Thus it would be quite acceptable for women to exercise spiritual gifts in more private settings, or any setting other than the actual gathering of the whole church gathered corporately. So as a significant (prominently mentioned) part of Aquila's ministry household, Priscilla would find appropriate expression of her teaching gift in private conversation, even in helping to meekly correct Apollos' insufficient understanding of the gospel.

We find that when Apollos later left for Corinth there was a body of "brethren" in Ephesus (Ac 18:27) who corporately "wrote, exhorting the disciples [in Corinth] to receive him." It would appear that Aquila's household ministry was bearing fruit. We definitely know that by the time Paul wrote the epistle of 1 Corinthians (presumably from Ephesus) he sent greetings from Aquila and Priscilla (1Co 16:19), "with the church that is in their house." Their household ministry was obviously bearing increasing fruit.

We can only conjecture how things progressed for the ministry household of Aquila as the years went by, but some time later, when Paul wrote his epistle to the saints in Rome, he specifically said (Ro 16:3), "Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus." Apparently this household was now in Rome, and it seems the Lord was using their ministry there as well. After further commending them, Paul says (Ro 16:5), "Likewise greet the church that is

in their house." As in Corinth and Ephesus, Aquila and Priscilla and their household were clearly ministering together effectively in Rome, for the kingdom of God.

Another interesting ministry household in scripture is that of Philip the evangelist. He was one of the "seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom" (Ac 6:3) whom the apostles chose to supervise the distribution of food to the widows in Jerusalem. He was later used mightily in bringing the gospel to Samaria, and then led the Ethiopian eunuch to the Lord. The silence of scripture regarding Philip having a wife is clearly not to be taken as implication he was single. It was not unusual for a man's wife to be in the background. In this case, we conclude Philip had a wife, because his "four virgin daughters who prophesied" are mentioned (Ac 21:9). This ministry household provided hospitality to Paul and his companions (including Luke). Some assume that because Philip's daughters prophesied, their use of their gifts are arguments against Paul's repeated direction (1Co 14:34-35; he specifically claimed this among "the commandments of the Lord," verse 37) that the sisters "keep silent in the churches." However, there is nothing in the text causing us to think these young ladies prophesied in the church gatherings. Similarly, when another prophet, Agabus, showed up and prophesied that Paul would be bound in Jerusalem (Ac 21:11), there is no reason to understand that this prophecy was given in a church meeting, but rather in the hospitality context of Philip's family entertaining guests. Philip's was a ministry household where prayer, exhortation, and even prophecies were likely common, everyday occurrences by both men and women.

Yet another ministry household mentioned in the New Testament is that of Onesiphorus.

Paul wrote (2Ti 1:16-17), "The Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, for he often refreshed me, and was not ashamed of my chain; but when he arrived in Rome, he sought me out very zealously and found me." This brother, and perhaps his household, traveled to Rome at least partly for the purpose of finding Paul and ministering to his needs. Whether Onesiphorus' household was with him or not, Paul blessed the whole household. Why?

Paul continued (2Ti 1:18), "you know very well how many ways he ministered to me at Ephesus." Here was a brother who, whether traveling or at home, had a reputation for serving the needs of the saints. Given the reference to his household, it's not hard to imagine that they ministered together with the head of the house in very practical ways. This was another ministry household God was using corporately. Before closing this letter to Timothy he mentions the household of Onesiphorus one more time. He writes (2Ti 4:19) "Greet Prisca and Aquila, and the household of Onesiphorus." Clearly this whole household had a special place in Paul's heart. A final ministry household I would like to consider is that of Stephanas. Paul baptized this household in Corinth (1Co 1:16). They were Paul's first converts ("first fruits") in the Roman province of Achaia, and he commended them (1Co 16:15) as a household that "devoted themselves to the ministry of the saints." He went on to command something I haven't found anywhere else in the New Testament. He directed (1Co 16:16) the Corinthian saints to "submit to such." He tells the church there to "submit to" the whole household of Stephanas. And contrary to some other instances where English translators have used the word "submit," in the context of church relationships, this instance uses the Greek word *hupotasso*, a military term referring to subordination and obedience.

#### **APPLICATION**

It is clearly more effective to show someone something, than to simply talk about it. The biblical model is for leaders in the body of Christ to be "examples to the flock" rather than "being lords over" them (1Pe 5:3). One of the primary areas in which elders are to be examples is in the way they manage their families. To be such an example, those being ministered to must be able to see the household of the leader in operation.

I challenge the body of Christ to seek the Lord for revelation regarding God's heart for families, and to identify the bondage our cultural individualism imposes on us. I urge Christian workers to make their families their first ministry — their own children their primary disciples.

Then when we minister to others, we do well to do so, as much as possible, in the presence of our family.

For many years the Lord has led me to avoid traveling alone. Occasionally another brother will travel and minister with me. But usually I bring my wife or one of my children. When a ministry opportunity is close enough to drive, I often take my whole family with me. (As I write this, my whole family — wife and six children — are together on a three-month ministry tour in India.). I have seen the subtle, but definite, impact of having at least part of my family with me in ministry situations. It gives my words much more credibility, when folks see the fruit of my lifestyle, modeled before them.

My longing is that my family would be, like that of Stephanas, a pleasure to the Lord Jesus as an exemplary, powerful ministry household.

— Jonathan Lindvall

## **14**

### ***THE MINISTRY OF GIVING***

Which group of believers is better able to fund church planters and assist the poor, a thousand believers organized in a single traditional church that meets in their own church sanctuary, complete with a Sunday School complex and family life center (containing a bowling alley, racket ball courts, and gymnasium), or a thousand believers divided up to 50 house churches with mostly bi-vocational leaders? A survey of U.S. Protestant congregations revealed that 82% of church revenues goes toward buildings, staff and internal programs; only 18% goes to outreach. In the biblical house church, those percentages can easily be more than reversed! Since there is no building complex to support, often no full time pastor, and no offering plate is passed each week, one of the most frequently asked questions from folks new to the biblical house church is, “What do we do with our tithes and offerings?” The answer to this is both fun and liberating. First, God loves a “cheerful” giver (2Co 9:6-7), and giving the New Testament

way can be great fun! Second, it is liberating in the sense that your giving resources are freed up to be given where need most: supporting full time church workers and assisting the needy.

Since the house church in which I participate rarely takes up a collection, how do we give?

As a leader, I encourage each family to set aside a percentage of every paycheck into their own special “giving” fund. Week after week each family’s funds can accrue there, stored up until a need in the congregation arises. Giving in our church is usually directly from giver to “getter,” with no middleman involved (though collections are occasionally taken). In this way we give to missionaries, foreign orphanages, the persecuted church, local elders, and the needy. We purposely have no church bank account nor church property.

## **COLLECTIONS**

Few causes in the New Testament warranted an actual collection from the church corporately. One was to help other believers in need (Ac 11:27-30; 24:17; Ro 15:25-28; 1Co 16:1-4; 2Co 8:1-15; 9:12). Another was to support apostles (church planters) in their work (Ac 15:3; Ro 15:23-24; 1Co 9:1-14; 16:5-6, 10-11; 2Co 1:16; Php 4:14-18; Tit 3:13-14; 3Jn 5-8).

Whenever believers in other places were undergoing hardship (due to famine, persecution or whatever), the other churches were called upon to supply financial aid. It is important to note that such collections were never ongoing – they ceased after the need was met (Ac 11:27-30; 12:25; 1Co 16:1-4). To this end we in the Western church would do well to support our brothers in the Chinese church. Local giving to the poor was done in secret and directly (Mt 6:1-4, 19-21; Ep 4:28). Also, a “list” of local widows who qualified for assistance was kept by a church (1Ti 5:3, 9, 16).

The church was also obligated to support the sending out of apostles (church planters). The Greek word for “send” (*propempo*) is, in the New Testament, associated with helping someone on their journey with food or money, by arranging for traveling companions, means of travel, etc. It is to “send” an apostle off with material sustenance (Ac 15:3; Ro 15:24; 1Co 16:6,11; 2Co 1:16;

Tit 3:13; 3Jn 5-8). The same case can be made for the word “welcome” (Php 2:29; 3Jn 10). To “welcome” a church planter was to provide temporary lodging for him and to meet his physical needs. New Testament church planters were given lump sums to get them to their destinations. Once there, they would evangelize the area, establish churches, train them in the basics and move on. En route they might be “welcomed” at existing churches and then be “sent” along again. 1 Corinthians 9:1-14 states that apostles/church planters have the “right” to earn their living from the gospel Paul was versatile enough to be able to supply his own needs when church funds were lacking. Others in the early church who received gifts were full time evangelists and qualified elders.

It is disturbing to contrast New Testament giving objectives with where ministry money often goes today. The Memphis newspaper *The Commercial Appeal* reported in the mid-1980s that a local Baptist church’s downtown building complex had 330,000 square feet of inside space, 1,400 parking spaces, 221 classrooms, and an auditorium that held 2,700 people. Their average *monthly* utility bill, even back then, was \$25,000.00! Their pipe organ was valued at \$800,000. How did Paul and the other apostles *ever* get along without such ministerial tools? There is not much justification in the New Testament for such expenditures. Instead, New Testament pattern is to give to people, not property.

## **TITHING**

“The Bible teaches it; I believe it; tithing.” Such are the words chanted weekly by the congregation of a large church I used to attend. Some pastor-teachers have emphatically declared that unless God’s people tithe, they are robbing God (Mal 3:8-10)! One mega-church has its members cite the “Tither’s Creed.” They repeat, “The tithe is the Lord’s. In truth we learned it. In faith we believe it. In joy we give it. The tithe!”

Of course, the Bible does teach tithing. And the same Mosaic Law that requires tithing also teaches God’s people not to eat shrimp or oysters. The real question is whether such Old

Covenant laws are still binding under the New Covenant. Is the law of Moses identical to the law of Christ?

By way of contrast, the Old Testament tithe was compulsory, not voluntary. Its purpose was to financially support a theocratic government. It was like our federal income tax. It was part and parcel of the whole Levitical system with its priests and temple (2Ch 24:6, 9). Unlike Israel, the church is not under a theocracy, but rather human, secular governments. Unlike Israel, the church has no special class of priests, but rather all in the church are priests. Unlike the Mosaic Covenant, the New Covenant has no elaborate temple to build and upkeep. Instead, the church met in the homes of its members, and believers themselves (both individually and corporately), make up God's temple (living stones in a spiritual temple). Just as there is no more temple, no more separate priestly class, no more theocracy, no more "holy" land, no more restrictive diet (oysters, shrimp), so also there is no more tithing. Tithing is never commanded in the New Covenant. There has been a "change of law" (Heb 7:12), the former regulation has been "set aside" (Heb 7:18), and the New Covenant made the first one "obsolete" (Heb 8:13).

Some brothers still feel compelled to tithe since the practice of tithing actually precedes the Old Covenant. For instance, Abraham tithed to Melchizedek, and since the Old Covenant was not initiated until several hundred years after that event, tithing is seen as an ongoing practice that transcends any one covenant. This argument seems plausible at first. However, once it is realized that this is an isolated (not an ongoing) event in the life of Abraham (the same can be said for Jacob's tithe), and that Abraham also offered animal sacrifices and circumcised the males of his household (both of which are now considered obsolete religious practices by all Christians), the strength of that argument wanes. At best, one should conclude that we only have to tithe once in our entire lives!

Other people's consciences are bound based on Jesus' statement that "you give a tenth of your spices . . . but you have neglected the more important matters of the law . . . you should have

practiced the latter, without neglecting the former” (Mt 23:23). The key to correctly applying this lies with the word “law” (Mt 23:23). Jesus was speaking to the teachers of the law and to the Pharisees – men who lived prior to the initiation of the New Covenant. The “law” is that of the Mosaic Covenant, not the New Covenant. The Israelis of Jesus’ day were indeed required to tithe (and, by the way, to make animal sacrifices). We of the New Covenant are under no such requirement since that first covenant and its law has passed away. *Viva* the law of Christ! Of course, there is nothing wrong with tithing if that is what God has led you to do. As was pointed out above, Abraham and Jacob both tithed voluntarily before the law was given. They serve as good examples to follow! The key is that our giving is to be according to how we have purposed in our hearts to give. Just don’t feel obligated to tithe.

#### **REAPING & SOWING**

Without dispute the New Covenant extols the virtue of generosity. In Matthew 6:19-21, Jesus taught us to store up treasures in heaven. In Matthew 19:21, Jesus told the rich young ruler that by giving to the poor, he could have treasure in heaven. 1 Timothy 6:18-19 exhorts us to be “generous and willing to share . . . lay up treasure . . . as a firm foundation for the coming age.”

We are to share with others, “for with such sacrifices God is pleased” (Heb 13:16).

But how much should we give? The answer depends on how much we want to reap later, how much we want to be blessed, and how much treasure we want in heaven. Scripture says to remember this: “whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” (2Co 9:6-7). According to the New Covenant, each man should give “what he has decided in his heart to give.” That’s all there is to it! Tithing, as required by Moses, is not a New Covenant practice. Notice that the text declares our giving is not to be done “reluctantly or under compulsion” (2Co 9:7). If some teacher says you must tithe, else you are robbing God, is that if not placing people “under

compulsion”?

Give whatever you have purposed in your heart to give. But consider that perhaps it is not the best use of your giving resources for them to be spent on special church sanctuaries, janitorial fees, landscaping, fancy throne-like furniture for pastors to sit in, or eighty thousand dollar pipe organs. Primarily, God intended: to help the needy and to support church workers (missionaries, church planters, apostles, evangelists, qualified elders, etc).

— Steve Atkerson

**15**

### **HEALTHY ASSEMBLY LIFE**

Believers who begin to practice *ekklesia* outside of traditional churches usually face a number of obstacles. Obviously, everyone brings their past church “baggage” with them to some degree. Folks can often see the problems with how most churches try to do things, but they are not always sure how to avoid such pitfalls in the fresh setting of home gatherings. In this chapter I would like to set forth some basic, fundamental perspectives that past experience tells me will go a long way toward helping the saints to get started on the right foot. First, we will look at the foundation we must work from, then we will examine some very practical issues about getting along with one another and working out problems together.

### **WHAT DO WE BUILD ON?**

Given the propensity of human traditions to multiply and block the truth, it is important for believers to be sure that their practice of church is built on the correct foundation. A search of the New Testament reveals that there is only one foundation for the *ekklesia* and that is Jesus Christ Himself — His unique person, His redemptive work, and His authoritative words (1Co 3:11; 15:3-4; Mt 7:28-29; 17:5). In terms of what Jesus taught it is clear to see what He viewed as central for the New Covenant community. On the eve of His death, after He had washed the disciples’ feet, He announced without ambiguity, “A new commandment I give to you, that you

love one another. As I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love one to another” (Jn 13:34-35). Every outworking of church life must flow out of a one-another love that imitates what the Lord did for us on the cross (Jn 15:12-13).

### **WHERE DID OUR EXODUS OCCUR?**

It is vital to see the precise parallel at this point between the Old and New Covenants. Both covenants were based upon the Lord’s action in history to separate to Himself a people. Israel was separated to God by the Exodus out of Egypt; the *ekklesia* was separated to God by the Exodus accomplished by Christ in Jerusalem (Lk 9:31). The moral demand on Israel was first prefaced by mention of God’s mighty arm: “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery” (Ex 20:2). The moral demand upon the New Covenant people is rooted in Christ’s work on Golgotha, “as I have loved you.” The pattern is clear — the redemptive event (the indicative) is the basis for the required life-style (the imperatives) of the covenant peoples. That is to say, the event that saves us also commands us how to live. Douglas Webster said that, “Understanding the nature of Christ coincides with living out the ethics of Jesus . . . . The Christian ethic is exclusively dependent upon Christian redemption . . . . Jesus’ cross is planted squarely at the center of the believer’s existence, providing both the means of salvation and the challenge of a new life-style” (*A Passion for Christ: An Evangelical Christology*, Zondervan, 1987, pp. 52, 149, 153).

If you look at books on Christian Ethics you will discover that most of them end up being expositions of the Ten Commandments, as if ethical fullness can only be found in Exodus 20. In such volumes the “new commandment” and its implications are almost never given any attention. To cite a glaring example, in Patrick Fairbairn’s massive *The Revelation of Law in Scripture*, he devotes a great deal of space to the Ten Commandments, but says almost nothing about the “new command” in John 13. In the history of theology more attention has fallen on the Old Covenant

ethics based on the Egyptian Exodus than on the New Covenant ethics flowing out of the Exodus Christ carried out in Jerusalem (Lk 9:31). Perhaps this accounts for why “church” has traditionally, in certain key areas, been shaped more by Old Covenant images than New Covenant revelation.

In light of John 13 it is imperative that we build upon the foundation articulated by Christ.

The New Covenant was sealed and inaugurated by the shedding of His blood. On the eve of His death as the spotless lamb of God, He announced that a new commandment was inseparably connected to His New Exodus. A question that must be answered is, “What makes this commandment ‘new’?” The command to love was ancient and revealed many times in the Old Testament. What makes it “new” is uncovered in the Lord’s words, “*as I have loved you.*” A new redemptive event brings with it a singular command to love one another, out of which flows all the many other imperatives embedded in the New Covenant — “if you love me, keep my commandments.”

The specific focus of the new commandment is *one another*. This shows that Christian ethics primarily relates to *body ethics*. At the core of the New Testament is a concern for the *Ekklesia* to live out the implications of the “new man,” which Christ created on the cross, making peace in a priesthood where there is neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor free, male nor female. As Paul Lehmann observes, “Christian ethics is *koinonia ethics*,” and the *ekklesia* is a context where *maturity*, and not mere morality, is spawned (*Ethics in A Christian Context*, Harper, 1963, pp. 47, 54). Our ecclesiology, therefore, must be rooted in the *New Covenant* which has been put into effect as binding, and our relations as brothers and sisters must be bathed in the *new commandment* to love one another as He loved us at Calvary.

#### **“ACCEPT ONE ANOTHER / ADMONISH ONE ANOTHER”**

After being a Christian for fifteen years, around 1980 I began to struggle with a problem that occurs with tragic frequency in Bible-believing circles. I saw church split after church split. I

saw brethren biting and devouring one another. I thought in my heart, “How can the New Testament, which puts so much emphasis on love and unity, become the source for so much division and strife?” Somewhere in the midst of my personal turmoil, the Lord brought me to the two-fold perspective of Paul in Romans 15. It does not, of course, bring an immediate resolution to every possible scenario we will face. However, I strongly believe that to the degree that we can practice this two-fold dimension of assembly life, we will go a long way toward avoiding the ugliness that, unfortunately, has come to mark much that bears the name Christian.

In the context Paul has dealt with the sticky reality that the early church had to face early on – Jews and Gentiles were brought together as a “new man,” and they were meeting together in the same homes. Paul, of course, did not opt for the easy thing to do, namely, have Jewish believers meet in one place, and the Gentile believers meet somewhere else. The only consistent outworking of the Gospel was for *the two radically different ethnic groups to meet together* because Jesus on the cross brought the two together, thereby making peace (Ep 2:12-18). This was a volatile situation, and Paul faces it head-on in Romans 14-15.

So after dealing with how Jewish and Gentile saints should show love to one another in areas like foods, drinks and days, Paul comes to the conclusion of the matter in Romans 15:7 – “Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.” Then in verse 14 we discover the flip side of this exhortation to accept each other – “I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another.” In these two verses a tension is revealed that we must all wrestle with: how can we pursue truth together without destroying our fellowship, and how can we pursue fellowship together without avoiding Christ’s truth?

Churches tend to illustrate the pendulum swing – they either pursue truth in an atmosphere without love and caring (which results in witch-hunts), or they emphasize acceptance and love with little interest in Christ’s revealed will (which results in gushy sentimentality). Why do we

sever what God has joined together? Why can't we cultivate and encourage an atmosphere of acceptance in which we will learn to speak the truth to one another in love? Our tendency is to reject other Christians who disagree with our understanding of Scripture in what we regard as crucial issues. Or, there is the tendency to so underscore acceptance that there is no concern for revealed truth. *To fully accept one another in the bonds of the Gospel and to instruct one another in an atmosphere of acceptance is a tension we must face and work out.*

Growth, according to Paul, can occur only when we speak the truth to one another in love (Ep 4:15; Jn 17:17). Elliot Johnson rightly observes, "In a sense, evangelicals have lived with an interpretational truce. While we agree on doctrinal 'essentials' we have also agreed to not talk very seriously about issues of disagreement. Yet Paul charted God's strategy for Christian growth [in Ep 4:12-13]. In order to reach unity we need some way to talk about our different interpretations and to evaluate these differences" ("Author's Intention & Biblical Interpretation," Position Paper given in Chicago at the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, 1982, pp. 1-2). The problem in most configurations of believers is that the very rationale for the group's existence rules out the possibility of certain "truths" being discussed. The "truth" is already defined in terms of some predetermined boundaries. I suggest that this kind of behavior is childish and makes a mockery of the Holy Spirit and the Gospel. When we face new issues from the Word are we willing to *work together, study together, pray together and even fast together* in order to seek the Lord's mind and come to greater agreement? Most of us are ready to separate from other brethren at the drop of a hat. But it takes a commitment to the truth and to the brothers and sisters to be willing to work matters out.

### **SEEKING TRUTH TOGETHER IN FELLOWSHIP**

In 1981 a brother sent me some material from Vernard Eller's 1964 doctoral thesis. It was like dew from heaven. It put into words what I had begun to see emerge from Romans 15:7 and 14. It provided a singularly important grid that will help any group get started in the right

direction. When groups fall apart I believe the root causes can be traced back to a failure to practice the vital perspectives Eller has isolated. What follows are some of his key thoughts that echo the two-fold vantage point of Romans 15:

- *Previous Commitment to Follow Scripture* — Such an assembly must come to the Scriptures having previously made the commitment to obey and follow as literally and completely as possible whatever leading may be discovered therein.
- *Centrality of Love* — Such an assembly, above all, must preserve the love for one another, without which any religious insight, no matter how correct it may be technically, loses its truth.
- *Instruct in An Atmosphere of Love* — Such an assembly will respect and maintain brotherhood with all sincere seekers of truth (Ro 15:7), though at the same time, they will see it as their Christian duty to point out what they feel to be the errors in the other's thinking (Ro 15:14).
- *Seeking Truth Without Fracturing Fellowship* — A dialectic is in operation here: The preservation of fellowship is of supreme value; however, uniformity, or unanimity, in the truth is also of high value. The pressure toward unanimity dare not be allowed to destroy fellowship, but neither dare the joys of fellowship be allowed to stifle the search for the point of concord that marks the truth . . . . If this dialectical balance be patiently maintained, the Spirit can and will eventually bring about unanimity – while in the process enhancing rather than destroying fellowship.
- *Humility and Openness Necessary* — Much more important than *having* the truth is being in a position to *receive* the truth; thus, the life of the church always must be open-ended toward God. (*Searching Together*, Spring, 1983, pp. 13-14).

If every assembly would walk in the power of the Spirit according to the ways described above, we would see a lot less rancor and a lot more unity in love and truth. The problem is, of course, that it is people like you and I who make up the parts of each *ekklesia*. We are all very capable of putting ourselves and our agendas ahead of others. This reality underscores the

importance of each part of the body being *committed* to loving one another fervently. When physical families have problems they don't run away from each other. Hopefully, there is a commitment present that will stick it out during the process of resolving issues. How much more in the spiritual body of Christ should we be willing to persevere with one another in anticipation of the Lord by His Spirit enhancing our fellowship as we speak the truth in love?

#### **“AGREE WITH ONE ANOTHER” (1 CORINTHIANS 1:10)**

No human family can function indefinitely without having to face a conflict or problem.

Likewise, in Christ's family there will be problems that must be resolved. Indeed, much of what was written in the New Testament had to do with correcting errors of teaching and practice among the saints. What guidelines does the New Testament give for working through the bumpy times that any congregation will inevitably face? 1 Corinthians 1:10 reveals some critical apostolic teaching in this regard.

First, it can be noted that Paul directs his exhortation to the “brethren.” These were believers in a city who *maintained an ongoing relationship with one another in the bonds of Christ*. They were committed to one another because of their common interest in the Gospel. It is this deep mutual fellowship (*koinonia*) in Christ that provides the backdrop for Paul's approach to them with correction. Larry Crabb notes a vital perspective that emerges from this consideration, “Change takes place when *truth is presented in relationship*. Perhaps a relationship of deep regard and empathetic concern is the *context* for change, creating an atmosphere in which the truth of God can be heard nondefensively and thus penetrate more deeply . . . to be healthy, *a church must present truth in the context of encouraging relationships*” (*Encouragement: The Key to Caring*, Zondervan, 1984, pp. 84, 91).

This insight reflects what we saw in Romans 15:7. A loving, caring, accepting atmosphere must be the context for speaking the truth to each other in love (Ro 15:14). What reason would we have to think that Gospel truth will take deep root in a setting which reflected instead the

modified line from the old song, “Where seldom is heard, an encouraging word”?

Next, Paul confronts the Corinthians with a very serious problem. Paul had a number of issues with them, but this is the one at the top of his list. They were clustering around gifted personalities, and by such schism were ruining the image of an undivided Christ. “Each one of you is saying, ‘I’m of Paul; and I’m of Apollos; and I’m of Peter; and I’m of Christ.’” This sinful division was already occurring and had driven the saints apart from one another.

To solve this problem Paul appeals to them “to agree” about the wickedness of this situation. If they “agreed” then the divisions could no longer exist. The participle *katartismenoi* used in verse 10 is significant. It is from the same verb used in Ephesians 4:12, translated there as “equip” or “prepare.” It is the verb used when the disciples were “mending” their nets (Mt 4:21; Mk 1:19). We could loosely translate the verb, “mending with a view toward rendering something as functional again.” This idea also emerges again in Galatians 6:1, “*restore* such a one...”

As used in the context of 1 Corinthians 1:10, we can see an important implication of being “perfectly united in mind and thought.” While we are not given any of the details as to how they worked this out, at a minimum we can say that the Corinthians had to work through this matter until the breach was “mended” and they finally “agreed.” *A process which results in unity is in view.* They were already split apart, so in order for the torn garment to be repaired they had to: (1) take the apostolic instruction; (2) come back together; (3) face and discuss the word of the Lord together; (4) repent of their sins; and (5) be restored again to their original oneness.

The utterly amazing fact is that, even with all their problems, *Paul assumes that the assembly has the spiritual resources to overcome their waywardness.* Many posit that the problem-solving abilities Paul presupposes will only work among mature churches. But this is a bogus suggestion. Corinth was in many ways a very *immature* assembly, but Paul still expects them, for example, to deal with immorality in their midst (1Co 5) and to resolve their disputes

internally without going to unbelieving courts (1Co 6).

The apostles taught that within the New Covenant community *all* were anointed by the Holy Spirit who enabled them to “test” and “discern” what the will of God might be (1Jn 2:20, 27; 4:1; 1Th 5:21). The *ekklesia*, therefore, is first of all a *discerning community*, able to “bind and loose,” and thus is also a *decision-making community*. The very word chosen to earmark the New Covenant people of God, *ekklesia*, is taken from the secular political realm, not from a religious context. *Ekklesia* referred to a group of people with common interests getting together to accomplish certain business. It would be very similar to the town meetings that took place in developing America in the 1800’s. John H. Yoder observes that, “The word *ekklesia* itself . . . does not refer to a specifically religious meeting, nor to a particular organization: it rather means the “assembly,” the gathering of a people into a meeting *for deliberation* or for a public pronouncement . . . . The church is where, *because there Jesus is confessed as Christ*, people are empowered to speak to one another in God’s name . . . . It is only in the local face-to-face meeting, with brothers and sisters, who know one another well, that this process can take place of which Jesus says that what has been decided stands decided in heaven” (“Binding & Loosing,” *Concern #14*, Feb. 1967, pp. 2ff.; cf. *TDNT*, IV, p.336).

As you reflect on the New Testament epistles, it is quite striking that church leaders are not addressed separately, as if some special decision-making authority resided in them. Instead, Paul directs his writings to the *entire assembly*. For example, he does not rebuke the elders at Corinth for failing to deal with the immoral person or for not resolving the disputes among the brethren. He puts the nexus of responsibility on the *whole congregation* to carry out Christ’s revealed will. Paul’s approach flies in the face of the traditional decision-making method, which views “the pastor,” or a body of leaders, as the source of decisions. Abraham Kuyper, for instance, removed the “right to judge” from the congregation and asserted that “the administrative authority over the church rests not with the members, but properly with the presbyters”

("Pamphlet on The Reformation of the Church," *The Standard Bearer*, Oct. 1979, p. 14). Jay Adams avers that "take it to the church" means "take it to the elders," who then forgive or excommunicate (*Ready to Forgive*, Pres. & Reformed, pp. 3-4). Such an interpretation is arbitrary, informed more by presuppositions than by the text itself. Elders will certainly be a part of the "discerning" process in the body, but the New Testament will not sustain the notion that *elders are the process itself*. The truth is, there is very little focus on elders in the New Testament, compared to the at least fifty-eight "one-another" imperatives found therein. Both times Jesus uses *ekklesia* to identify His New Covenant people, He attaches "binding and loosing" to its function (Mt 16:19; 18:18). This clearly indicates that we need to significantly broaden our ideas of what is entailed in doing "church." Traditionally, doing church means going to a building, sitting in a pew, singing some songs, putting some money in a plate, hearing a sermon, shaking the pastor's hand, and heading home to get your roast out of the oven. Most fundamentally, however, *ekklesia* means doing the whole gamut of kingdom activities with other committed believers in a local congregation. We are not used to thinking of resolving disputes within the body as "church," but the essence of practicing *ekklesia* involves *problem-solving* and *decision-making* in an atmosphere of loving acceptance where Christ's truth can be spoken in love.

It behooves us, therefore, to realize that it is expected of assemblies to "agree with one another" and to be "perfectly united in mind and thought" This does not mean that we must have unanimity regarding every doctrinal nuance, but it does mean that we must be ready to work things out with our brethren as required in light of apostolic teaching. Paul was not surprised when congregations had problems, but he was upset when they failed to work through their problems together as a body. Here is a question each of us needs to face: when the inevitable day comes in my assembly that a problem surfaces, am I going to run and hide from it, or am I going to stand with the body and do my part to be part of its resolution? Real *ekklesia* requires hard

work and commitment, but we must never forget that Jesus' presence by the Spirit, persistent prayer, preferring others ahead of ourselves, and fervent love are where the battles are won.

**"HONOR ONE ANOTHER ABOVE YOURSELVES" (ROMANS 12:10)**

One of the most staggering goals of Christ's work is set forth in 2 Corinthians 5:15, "those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died for them and was raised again." One of the unending lessons of discipleship is to take up our cross daily and follow Christ, to consciously by the Spirit's power stop living for ourselves and serve Him. In terms of our life in the body of Christ, one of the key ways we demonstrate a selfless life is to put others' needs ahead of our own.

Think about it. If each believer was preferring others ahead of oneself, everybody's needs would be met. We would all be looking out for each other. No one would be forgotten. It sounds so simple, but we all know that body life does not work out that smoothly because each of us struggles with putting ourselves ahead of others.

In terms of our life together as believers, and in light of our responsibility to work things out in the body, one of the central ways we manifest non-self-centered living is by *listening to the concerns and burdens of others*. James 1:19 says, "let everyone be quick to hear, and slow to speak and slow to anger."

Some commentators see in James' remark a corrective to what was transpiring in early Christian gatherings. Curtis Vaughn and Earl Kelly note that, "There may be an illusion [in James 1:19] to the free and unstructured worship of the early Christian assemblies" (*James: A Study Guide*, Zondervan, 1960, p. 35). Further, "It is possible that contentious Christian babes were taking advantage of the informal style of worship in the early Christian church to produce wrangling" (*James: A Primer for Christian Living*, Presbyterian & Reformed, 1974, p. 69).

The point is that in our dealings with one another each of us must first of all "be quick to hear." Obviously, in any configuration of brethren there will be those who will want to talk a lot,

those who are very reticent, and others in-between. Those who have the gift of gab should take to heart James' admonition, "be slow to speak." They should prefer others ahead of themselves, and be sure that they do not stifle the input of others, either by dominating the discussion, or by coming across in such a dogmatic tone that no one feels up to contributing their thoughts. The verbally timid should be encouraged to share their insights by the rest of the group, realizing that "each one of us" has the potential of adding edifying content to the meeting (1Co 14:26). As William Barclay observes about the meeting described in 1 Corinthians. 14, "The really notable thing about an early Church service must have been that almost everyone came feeling that he had both the privilege and obligation of contributing something to it . . . Obviously this had its dangers for it is clear that in Corinth there were those who were too fond of the sound of their own voices" (*The Letters to the Corinthians*, Westminster Press, pp. 149-150).

In light of the exhortation for each of us to be "quick to hear," what are some vital attitudes that we must cultivate in our body relationships?

1. *We must be open to learn from brethren in various traditions.* We all tend to stick to some party-line and turn our heads away from information outside of our comfort zone. A.N. Groves wrote in 1833 concerning his relationship with J.N. Darby, "I do not think we ought to propose to be modeled *unlike* every sect, but simply to be like Christ; let us neither seek nor fear a name. *I wish rather to have from every sect what every sect may have from Christ*" (Roy Coad, *A History of the Brethren Movement*, pp. 114-115).

Are we willing to "listen" to multiple sources and discern from them what might help us discover the mind of Christ? Are we really open to be challenged by others to search the Scriptures and see what is indeed so? Thomas Dubay notes in this regard: "Since no one of us mortals, affected as we are with original sin, is perfectly pure in his desire for truth, no one of us is exempt from some degree of close-mindedness. It is only our God who is truth than can cure our reluctance to embrace all of his truth, however he speaks it" ("Communication in

Community," *Searching Together*, Winter, 1985, p. 11).

2. *"We need to be humble,"* says Dubay, "small in our own estimation. Finding the solution to a mathematical problem is possible without humility, but finding God's will is impossible without this virtue. James 4:6 tells us that God resists the proud but gives grace (and light) to the humble" ("*Communication*," p. 11). Whenever a group of believers bathed in humility gather together, great things can be expected; but, as James 3:16 notes, where there is "envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice." The truly humble put others ahead of themselves. They pay attention to what they hear from others.

3. *We must always have a "willingness to be changed by what is going to be said (without, of course, sacrificing genuine principles).* One listens wholly only if he is willing to modify his present position if the evidence warrants it. People who are set in their thoughts and determined not to change their behavior do not listen to contrary evidences" (Dubay, p. 11). If we confess that we do not know anything as we ought, then we will be open to new light from our brethren. We must listen to possible new evidence that has escaped our attention. As Eller noted, the church must always be open-ended toward God's truth in Christ.

4. *We must "grow in awareness that the person speaking is important, even precious, "God's beloved" (Ro 1:7).* We pay attention to important people. To the proud person others are not important and so he is not inclined to take them seriously. Even more, we value the opinions of those we love. If I do not really care what my brother thinks, I had better doubt that I love my brother" (Dubay, p. 11). I have seen so many cases in assemblies where those who articulate things with razor-sharp logic bulldoze over the "little person," and pooh-pooh any concerns they have. You may think that a question or concern coming from another is immature, or ill-timed, or very low on your list of priorities, but if you really love that person you must give your ears and heart to that fellow-believer who is precious to Christ. We must highly esteem the input of every part of the body, or we run the risk of missing the voice of Jesus in our midst. In Christ's body

we are instructed to heap more honor on those parts that seem to be weaker and less honorable (1Co 12:22-24).

A huge chunk of not living for ourselves, but for Christ, is displayed in how we defer to one another in the body of Christ. Without apology I say that to the degree a committed body of believers by God's grace follows the perspectives set forth in this article, they will fare well and be able to tackle the inevitable bumps that come in the course of assembly life. If these perspectives are forgotten, neglected, or rejected, then a body will more than likely self-destruct. Functioning together in the *ekklesia* is like holding a bird in your hand. If you hold it too tightly you will kill it. If you hold it too loosely it will fly away. If believers are fueled by the love Christ had for them on the cross – “as I have loved you” – then they can successfully keep the bird alive by loving one another fervently.

After considering what has been said about body life, you may be thinking: “There is just one thing wrong with the biblical view of the church which we have been sketching: *it does not seem to exist*. The definition is fine, but the phenomenon it describes is missing” (John H. Yoder, "A Light to All Nations," *Concern #9*, March, 1961, p. 17).

The fact that we are so far from where we should be is a valid cause for concern. But the truth that these attitudes and perspectives are the obvious will of Christ by the Spirit must give us great confidence that they can become realities in our assemblies.

"Lord Jesus, please enable us to give ourselves to the life of love you have revealed in your Word."

— Jon Zens

#### **FURTHER RESOURCES**

- “Coming to Truth in Fellowship with Others” [11 Articles], *ST*, Spring, 1983, 48 pp. (\$3.00)
- Dubay, Thomas. “Communication in Community,” *ST*, Winter, 1985, pp. 1-14. (\$2.00)
- Hammett, Rosine & Loughlin Sofield, “Developing Healthy Christian Community,” *ST*,

Autumn, 1986, pp. 2-16. (\$2.00)

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*The above materials are available from Searching Together, Box 377, Taylors Falls, MN 55084*

16

*Truth Practiced — Church Discipline*

### **THE MOTIVATION OF DISCIPLINE**

One of the many characteristics and actions of our Savior is His desire to see all of His children walk in truth. His love for us is demonstrated in many ways. He gave Himself, He saved us, He changed us, He empowers us, He lives in us, He guides us, directs us, teaches us and yes, He disciplines us. All is motivated by His love for His children. Consider the declaration of Revelation 3:19, "Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent."

This love-motivated discipline is the Father's desire for His children to know the truth and to walk in it. This love is a recognition that the Father knows best and that He wants the best for His children. It is the recognition that we see through a glass darkly and that we make sinful decisions and selfish decisions that bring sometimes horrible consequences to our lives. Since the Father sent the Son to bring us life, and that life more abundantly, we need correction and

direction and discipline, which He lovingly provides.

The Father's love expressed in discipline is explained in Hebrews 12:4-11: "'My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.' Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it."

Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology states that "the notion of the discipline of God, and eventually the concept of the community and its leaders effecting God's discipline, derives from the notion of domestic discipline (Deut 21:18-21; Prov 22:15; 23:13). God is portrayed as a father who guides his child . . . The notion of discipline as familial chastisement remains in the New Testament (Eph 6:4; 2 Tim 2:25; Heb 12:5-11)."

### **PERSONAL AND PRIVATE DISCIPLINE**

How does the Father discipline us? His disciplines take a variety of ways and methods, but usually includes a combination of both the Word and His Spirit. In a very private and personal way, through the Word and the conviction of the Spirit of God, He lovingly points out our sins and brings us to the truth. As we zealously repent, He delights in changing our minds and hearts and empowering us to overcome those areas that have defeated us in the past. How does the Word discipline us? 2 Timothy 3:16 declares that "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." As we read and study His Word, and we are made

aware of His commandments, we are given the opportunity to repent and do things His way.

Proverbs 6:23 states: "For these commands are a lamp, this teaching is a light, and the corrections of discipline are the way to life." Most Godly discipline takes place during devotions while in the Word and in prayer. Privately and personally, the Father shows us His way and gives us the power to do it!

The Word works in conjunction with the Holy Spirit to convince us of the rightness of the Lord's ways. For instance, Jesus promised in Acts 1:8 that "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." When we are saved, the Holy Spirit comes to live in us: "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?" (1Co 6:19). We have responsibility to guard what the Lord has given us through the Spirit. 2 Timothy 1:14 commands, "Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you — guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us." One of the tools we have to help us guard what the Lord has given us is the spirit of discipline. For instance, Paul reminded that "God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline." (2Ti 1:7).

All discipline is hard and difficult: "No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful.

Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it" (Heb 12:11). In contrast, according to Proverbs 12:1, "Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but he who hates correction is stupid." Our choice is clear; we can accept the discipline of the Lord and enjoy the peaceful fruits of righteousness or we can behave foolishly and reject His discipline.

### **PUBLIC CHURCH DISCIPLINE**

What happens when a brother or sister refuses the conviction of the Spirit and the clear teaching of the Word? When a believer openly embraces and practices a behavior clearly

forbidden by the Word? 1 Corinthians 12 teaches in detail that we are members of one body. Not only do we learn how the body functions and all the gifts in the body, we also learn that when one member of the body is sin sick, it affects the whole body. Verse 26 states "If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it." When our brother sins and does not repent it affects the whole body and the whole body suffers because of it. Remember, "Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it" (12:27). Consequently, we have a family responsibility to help our sinning brother. Motivated by love of the brother, we are commanded to confront the brother and the sin issue in order to restore the brother and guard the family that meets locally.

Although there are many scriptures that deal with this issue, the two main ones are found in Matthew 18 and Galatians 6. These passages are included for easy reference since they will be referred to often:

"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them" — Matthew 18:15-20

"Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." — Galatians 6:1-2

## **THE FIRST STEP**

The discovery process is always left up to the Lord. There is never to be a standing investigatory committee or an oversight group that is responsible for ferreting out the sin in one another's lives. As we walk out our lives in Christ, as we grow in intimacy and fellowship, we will naturally become more aware of what is going on in others lives. As we walk out our life in Christ and we "discover anyone in a trespass" or if we see a brother "sinning", we are then called to act on behalf of the brother. It is important to note that all of us, not just the elders and leaders, are called to this body ministry. If you are the one who sees a brother in trespass, you are responsible for going to the brother and confronting him. Don't go to the elders; go to the offending brother. The only qualification given for the person confronting is that he be a brother and the he be "spiritual", indwelt by the Spirit of the Living God.

If the Lord has chosen you to be used in this fashion, the first step is to pray and check your motivation. Are we motivated by love of the brother? Are we operating in a spirit of gentleness? Are we trying to restore the brother? Are we being careful in case we are tempted in a like manner? Obviously, there is much to be prayed about and considered before we take the first step of talking privately with the sinning brother.

Having prepared yourself through prayer and self examination, the next step is to go privately to the sinning brother, "showing him his fault *in private*" (italics mine). I am convinced that this is the Lord's choice method. It springs from the fact that most discipline is personal and private and provides a bridge between personal and public discipline. Jesus was specific in using the words "in private". How wonderful that the Lord even cares if we get embarrassed and deliberately and specifically tried to protect us from the further embarrassment of public notice. What opportunity for quick and private repentance. When successful, this first step of public discipline brings the sinner to repentance, edifies the body and usually strengthen the relationship between the one confronting and the brother being confronted.

Time must be allowed for the Holy Spirit to convict and convince. Most people's initial

reaction is not their final reaction. Give the brother some room to prayerfully consider what you have brought to his attention. Do not put a timetable on the work of the Holy Spirit but continue to make yourself available to him for prayer and counsel. Don't expect an initial first response to be immediate repentance. It is a privilege to observe the Holy Spirit working in a brother's life. A good rule of thumb is to give the brother as much time as you would want someone to give you.

If the brother listens to you, you have won the brother. The matter is finished and no further confrontation is necessary. Careful consideration must be given to the fruits of repentance to make sure that the brother is sincere and that he is taking biblical steps to remove himself from the occasion of temptation. Continued prayer and counsel may be necessary to help the brother. Both should be offered until both the confronting brother and the sinning brother are convinced that victory has been achieved.

### **The Second Step**

What do we do if the brother refuses to listen and refuses to repent? Jesus said, "if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.'" There has been much written on the second step in public church discipline. Some suggest that the two or more witnesses be witness to the original trespass. Others believe that the two or more witness are there to witness the brothers as they confront the sin issue and to determine the attitude and responses of the two men involved in the confrontation. This step definitely takes the process out of the private arena into the public. It is a dramatic escalation of the process and is designed to bring public pressure on the brother to quit sinning and repent.

With two or three witnesses, we are to go to the sinning brother. Who should these witnesses be? I don't believe they have to be witnesses to the act of sin but are there to be witnesses to the confrontation. The witnesses should also be spiritual men who are well grounded

in the word and who will not be tempted in the area of sin. They should also have a relationship with both parties. They are there to observe the process and to offer counsel to both the confronter and the person being confronted. Because these confrontations sometimes get emotional and fiery, the witnesses can also act as overseers to make sure that there is a spirit of gentleness. While the person who is confronting the brother in sin, the two or three witnesses are to help keep the goal of restoration in mind and to keep the conversation going in the right direction. The person being confronted sometimes tries to change the focus by obfuscating, attacking the person or persons who are confronting him, offering excuses for the continued behavior or outright denial of the charges. The witnesses are to help both parties to remain calm, to keep the conversation focused on restoration, to make sure that the motivation of love of the brother is clearly communicated as the motive for the confrontation and to move the conversation towards a decision.

### **The Third Step**

If, after being confronted privately and with two/three witnesses, there is no fruit of repentance, the original confronter and the witnesses are to tell it to the church. This is not the church universal but the local church, the local group who meets in fellowship. The telling should include the nature of the sin, the steps that have already been taken and the results of the previous conversations. The first telling might be at a men's meeting so that each man can discern what is going on and decide what, if anything, to tell his own wife and children. Since the telling includes a description of the sin involved, consideration should be given to immature believers and children. Remember that the Scripture in Galatians teaches that the ones doing the confronting be spiritual (mature) and have a spirit of gentleness. The goal of restoration must be adhered to even more arduously in the very public disclosures as the possibility for wrong thinking and action increases with the number of brothers and sisters involved. Great care must be given to avoid tale bearing and gossip and exaggeration and wrong attitudes. The goal is

restoration not crucifixion of the brother. All members of the local body are now involved in confronting and helping the brother.

There are only two groups of people in the world; those who are saved and are in the church and those who are outside of the church. Jesus was speaking to his disciples at the time of Matthew 18 and the church did not yet exist. When Jesus said that the unrepentant brother was to be understood as a "gentile", He was telling His Jewish audience that the sinning brother was to be treated as if he were not part of the covenant family, an outsider, apart from the grace of God. One of the best examples of this is found in the Corinthian letters where Paul tells the Corinthians to put the brother out who was in sexual sin with his step mother and in the second letter he tells the Corinthians to take him back in to the fellowship of the church. As with all the other steps, this last and final step is to bring repentance and restoration.

### **Summary**

The good shepherd always goes after the lost sheep. The wonder of the gospel is that provision is made for the sinning brother who can not find his own way to repentance can, in fact, rely upon the good graces of a loving fellowship to be used in helping him be restored to full fellowship. These clear scriptural instructions are the "how to" steps for that restoration to take place. Consider the following principles:

1. The motivation for all discipline is the love of the Father.
2. Most discipline is private and personal.
3. Most discipline is accomplished through study and prayer of the Word and the active work of the Holy Spirit in a believer's life.
4. The practice of sin is a family issue and sometimes must be dealt with by other members of the church family for the sake of the brother and the family.
5. God Himself is the one who exposes and brings all things to light.
6. All mature spiritual members of the body are called to this body ministry.

7. Before confronting, prayer and self examination are required.
8. Be careful to protect the sinning brother's privacy by going to him in private.
9. If the brother rejects the counsel, go to him with 2 or three witnesses.
10. "If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church."
11. "If he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and as a tax collector."

— Mike Indest

## **17**

### ***CHURCH FAMILIES***

Malachi 4:4-6 foretells of God's family plan for Israel (and later the church). It shows what God expected of Israeli families – hearts turned toward each other. This turn of heart in family matters parallels the New Covenant change of heart in Jeremiah 31 where God says He will put His law into our hearts. Four hundred years later, the angel who appeared to Zechariah and announced the birth of John the Baptist quoted Malachi 4 to explain John's purpose and ministry. In Luke 1:13-17, the angel describes John as the one who will "turn many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God" and as the one who will "turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous - to make ready a people prepared for the Lord". The angel's style and arrangement of these two descriptions make them corollaries. He arranged everything around v 17a so that the facts about John's ministry would be obvious. John, as the forerunner, preached the message of turning toward the Lord, which in turn would restore the hearts of fathers to the hearts of their children.

One of the good works accompanying salvation will be a change in family attitudes and actions. The father will practice godly headship of the family; the mother will be the submissive support her husband needs as he strains to obey the Lord. The children will obey their father and mother. The family will love each other, will be kind to one another, and will be best friends with

each other. In short, the family will be the model of the Godhead and Christianity upon the earth. Children are not left out of this equation. We don't just "do our best and hope that they turn out all right." Look at Luke 1:17 again. The angel quoted only part of Malachi 4:6. He substituted "the attitude of the disobedient to that of the righteous" for "the hearts of the children to the fathers." The angel thus tells us what it means to have the "hearts of the children turned toward their fathers." The turning of the children's hearts (as expressed in Malachi) means that they will obey their parents (as expressed in Luke). When salvation genuinely reaches the parents, the children will eventually change from being disobedient to being righteous. This change, however, is not without great effort on the part of the parents. They will strive for godliness in their children. Part of the "turning" is repenting of the worldly way of rearing children. Parents who do strive for godliness in their children will be rewarded with their children's hearts turned toward them in obedience.

#### **CHURCH LEADERSHIP**

All this has great impact upon church leadership. Both the elder and the deacon "must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect" (1Ti 3:4; 5; 12) and have children who "believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient" (Tit 1:6). Marriage and children are requirements for being an elder. But that requirement does not hold true for the traveling apostle – neither Paul nor Timothy were married, and they are not called elders. The apostle Peter, on the other hand, was married and calls himself an elder in 1 Peter 5:1-3.

The elder must have children whose hearts are turned toward their parents. The elder who is too busy with his own or church concerns (as "good" as they may be) fails to understand the absolute priority of rearing his children in a way pleasing to God. Indications are that he himself has not turned to the Lord if his own heart is not turned to his children (Lk 1:13-17). Who else sees him twenty-four hours a day at his best and his worst? If he does not live out his Christianity

before his children, who is he to export it to others?

## **EVANGELISM**

You might think that with the above emphasis upon children, they ought to be the objects of the church's evangelistic efforts. But who were the objects of the apostles' evangelism? The book of Acts shows us that the apostles evangelized the heads of households, not children. Cornelius, Lydia, and the Philippian jailer all came to Christ because of the apostles' efforts. Amazingly, their whole households came with them. Is this only a cultural phenomena of that century? I don't think so. If we aim our evangelism at the fathers (or single mothers) we will, by the New Testament example, get the children. The man whose heart truly turns to the Lord will turn toward his children, and they too will likely come to Christ.

## **CHURCH DISCIPLINE**

Family matters relate directly to church discipline. The man who follows God will discipline his children (Ep 6:4, NASB). He will hold his children accountable for their actions and train them to obey him and his wife (see Pr 1:8; 2:1; 3:1; 4:1; 5:1; etc.).

Modern churches do not discipline the disobedient members because we have forgotten the biblical reasons and methods for disciplining our own children. As we have raised generations of children without biblical discipline, we have also raised the same generations to expect that no one can hold them accountable for their actions, least of all a church whose only requirements of them are their money and a few hours a week of their time. Children who have been raised to expect those in authority over them to provide needed discipline will not run from the church which seeks to discipline them for their good. In fact, children who have been raised in the discipline and instruction of the Lord will need very little church discipline as adults. We would be amazed at the transformation of our churches (and our society) over a generation if we would discipline our children to respond to God-given authority and not reject their father's discipline (Pr 3:11,12; and Heb 12:5-6) and, subsequently, the church's discipline.

## **CHURCH MEETINGS**

I am convinced that children of all ages should be with the parents in the house church meeting. If we take Ephesians 6:4 at face value, it is the father who is to train his children, not another adult teacher. The father who teaches his children the things of the Lord six days a week will not need someone else to do it on Sundays. A father who also disciplines his children will have them under control. His control will allow the children to be with the parents in the house church meeting. Remember that we are not training our children to remain children, but to be adults. They need to see how adults meet as a church and learn by participating as well. In our church, the families sit together. When necessary, the parents correct their children in our meetings or remove them for discipline, which some Sundays is often! But that is part of maturing as a church and as families. It is something we have taught to, and expect from, our parents and children. Children can do far more than we sometimes require. If they need to nap, they sleep in Dad's or Mom's lap, or in the chair or on one of our beds. Often the children play with quiet toys, read, or color (sometimes on paper, and then sometimes on the floor!). It's just like family.

God's way of communicating truth to the next generation has not changed. God intends truth to be taught and learned by children in a family setting. Neither the church nor society has this direct responsibility; fathers and mothers do. The sooner we learn this lesson in the body of Christ, the sooner we will put aside all the worldly ways of teaching and training children and have generations of godly men and women in the church who can turn the world upside down once again.

## **CHRISTIAN MINISTRY**

Paul's concept of ministry was derived partially from family life. Paul drew upon a godly family as he illustrates his own apostolic ministry to the Thessalonians in 1 Thessalonians 2:5-12. He used the nursing mother, and then the father, as examples. As an apostle, Paul could have

been paid for his work among them as he preached the Gospel and taught them discipleship. However, he worked hard among them day and night so they would not think him greedy. A nursing mother who cares for her children day and night provided the perfect example of Paul's service. Her emotional ties to her children propel her in her ministry of love and devotion. She nurtures her children in contrast with the man's primary role. Women are to be the nurturer in the home, and their emphasis on relationships gives impetus to Paul's ministry. Paul's tender care, and his willingness to sacrifice his time and energy for their welfare, imitated the godly mother caring for her children.

On the other hand, Paul also looked to the godly father who was very concerned with the righteousness of his children and apparently, their reputation. Paul convincingly wrote that the father directing the moral development of the children proved to be the perfect example for the apostle exhorting, encouraging, and imploring the new Christians at Thessalonica to walk worthy of God. This goes back again to the father's responsibility to his children; teaching them righteousness and training them to that standard. However, the father who loves his children and wants God's blessing upon them does not impose legalism upon the household. That breeds rebellion. Christians do not earn a right standing before God, nor keep it, by what they do. It means that through the relationship we have with our children, we fathers urge as strongly as possible our children's obedient walk with God. Paul capitalized on his observations of godly men who concern themselves with their children's conduct.

The passive father will raise sons who are themselves passive and liable to be dominated by women. His daughters will tend to be domineering in all areas of family, church, and society. The emotionless mother will produce children who cannot relate to people. All this can be prevented by involved fathers and mothers who see to the well-being of their children and teach them the proper roles of men and women in the family, church, and society. It seems to me that Paul took the outstanding characteristics of the mother and father and applied them to his

ministry: the emotional ties which caused sacrifice by the mother and the desire for children worthy of the family name which caused much involvement by the father. We must do the same.

## **CONCLUSION**

A church is a family. Paul names it the “household of God,” calls salvation “adoption as sons,” describes us as “heirs,” tells Timothy to “entreat an elder as a father,” calls Christians “brother” and “sister,” and uses a childhood name for father (*abba*) to address the heavenly Father. All of these descriptions point to the relationships we have to God and to one another.

A family is people relating to one another. Church relationships, good and bad, overwhelm the New Testament reader if he looks for them. The good church nurtures and builds those relationships and does not substitute an endless parade of activities for them. People desire healthy relationships more than anything else. However, house church members must be prepared to get close, very close. Think of it as porcupines snuggling up to get warm in the winter. The closer they get, the more quills they feel. When they draw back, they get cold. It is better to feel the quills!

The house church model best resembles a family because it meets where people live. The family who hosts a church meeting and the members who go there draw themselves together as a unit. The atmosphere is real, not surreal. The conversation does not compete with the organ prelude, the relationships with the clothes and cars, or the truth with hypocrisy.

The church which meets in a home also best contributes to a family’s spirituality and best enables a father as the head of the family to encourage their well-being. A house church allows the free time to teach one’s family what it means to be a Christian in the kingdom of Christ and God. Indeed, it does not just allow; it places upon a father that responsibility because there is no one else designated to do it. One cannot delegate this duty to a Sunday School teacher, Bible study leader, youth minister, or minister – there are none of those in a house church. The weekly teaching does not substitute for the father’s teaching, but complements it.

— Tim Melvin

*Tim offers an excellent weekend seminar on biblical child training. Contact him about coming to your church to present it! — Editor*

**18**

## ***DIVINE ORDER***

### **PART ONE: AN OVERVIEW OF DIVINE ORDER IN THE CHURCH**

All of us hate confusion. Ask any parent if they prefer confusion and openly promote chaos in their homes. Ask a librarian if the best way to run a library is to just throw all the books in a warehouse and look through the entire jumble every time she needs a book. What would our fellowship meetings be like if everybody spoke at once and if there were three teachings going on at the same time? What would our highways look like without lights, signs, an understood agreement that we all drive on the right side of the road, speed limits, and so on. The world in which we live could not function without order.

Whose order . . . man's or God's? This is the question we face in every decision we make as we allow the Holy Spirit to form Himself in us. Certainly we all know the scriptures that teach us to deny self and to put others first and esteem others more highly than ourselves. We remember with joy that we are being conformed to the image of His Son, Jesus the Christ. Yet still try to order our worlds according to the latest wisdom of man.

T. Austin-Sparks wisely observed: "To those who have a knowledge of the Bible it is evident that the whole of the Scriptures open up along the four lines that we have indicated; namely that

1. God is a God of order;
2. Satan is the prince of a world under divine judgment, and the nature of that judgment is confusion;
3. Christ, in Person and work, is the embodiment of divine order;

4. The church is the elect vessel in which, and through which, that divine order is to be manifested and administered in the ages to come.”

There is a discernible pattern of divine order in all that the Lord does. Starting in eternity past, we can discern divine order in the Trinity. As the Lord created the world and His institutions, we can observe this divine order being duplicated in the family, in government, and in the church.

For instance, Holy Writ declares that “The head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God” (1Co 11:3), and that “God is not a God of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints” (1Co 14:33).

### **THE TRINITY**

Consider the Trinity and, in particular, the relationship between the Father and the Son. The Father and the Son are equal in attributes and essence. A quick review of the names of Christ (God, Son of God, Lord, King of Kings and Lord of Lords), His attributes (omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, immutable, life and truth) and His works (creates, sustains, forgives sins, raises the dead, judges, sends Holy Spirit) all convince us that Jesus is God. In addition, the direct statements of Jesus in John 10:30, 14:9, 17:21ff, and Matthew 28:19 all convince us of the deity of our Savior. But is it possible to be equal and submitted? What does 1 Corinthians 11:3 mean where it is declared that “the head of Christ is God”? Here is divine order in its purest form and practice. While fully God, Jesus “who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bondservant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phlp 2:6-8).

Listen to the confession of Christ as He explains His submission to His Father:

John 6:38 — “I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent Me.”

John 4:34 — “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.”

John 5:30 — “I can of mine own self do nothing: as I hear, I judge: and my judgment is just; because I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me.”

Matt. 6:10 — “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.”

Matt 26:39 — “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.”

Equal but submitted! That is how divine order works in the Trinity. It is this divine order that is stamped on all of His creation. The family, government and the church all have explicit instructions as to their function and practice. All of these commands are grounded in the demonstrated order that exists within the workings of the Trinity. They are not arbitrary commands of a capricious God nor are they limited by culture or time. God created the family, government and the church to look like and to work like the Trinity and to enjoy the blessings of divine order in all that we do.

## **THE FAMILY**

Next in the order of creation is the family. There is no other institution on earth that more closely resembles the Trinity in its order and function. Make no mistake, all of the comparisons between the covenant of marriage and God’s covenant of salvation found in Ephesians and Colossians are a reflection of His love and His desire to share that love with us. But we must order our marriages according to *His* plan, not ours. In the same way that the Trinity operates in divine order, the Lord expects us to live our marriages the same way.

A husband and wife are equal in attributes and essence. Galatians 3:28 reveals that “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Like the Father and the Son, a husband and wife are equal in attributes and essence. But in order for the family to function biblically, God has clearly and unequivocally stated the divine plan. The husband is definitely the head of the wife: “the head of the woman is man” (1Co 11:3). As the

head, he is commanded to love his wife just like Christ loved the church and gave Himself for her. He is to love her like he loves his own body and to nourish and care for her. The wife is to submit to her husband in everything (just like within the Trinity: equal, but submitted). And, the children are to obey. Simply stated, the plan for divine order in the family is: Husbands love, wives submit, children obey.

Notice how closely this resembles the order that exists between the Father and the Son.

Since we are predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, see how divine order works to our benefit, how much better the Lord's plans are than men's. Consider the utter chaos and confusion that exists in all those who choose to order their family life according to man's wisdom instead of God's wisdom. Some chafe under God's order, arguing from a cultural point of view that these directives are out of date or were only for the time in which it is written and that we live in a more enlightened time or culture. How superfluous! God's plan for the family is nothing more than what He and His Son have enjoyed for time eternity, and it works!

Notice the order in the divine order. The Son submits to the Father. Man submits to the Son. The wife submits to the husband. The children submit to the parents. Not under compulsion but willingly, humbly, and with joy as we walk out God's plans for us.

## **GOVERNMENT**

Next in order of creation in time is government. The main passages stating the divine order in government are Romans 13:1ff, Titus 3:1ff, and 1 Peter 2:14ff. From these, three principles can be discerned:

Principle #1 — "For there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God" (Ro 13:7).

Principle #2 — "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities" (Ro 13:1).

Principle #3 — "Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves" Ro 13:2

It takes faith to submit to God; it takes faith for a wife to submit to her husband; it takes faith to submit to governing authorities. We sometimes forget that history is “His” “story” and that the Lord is working His will at all times. Peter, in 1 Peter 2:13, urged: “Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. For it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men.”

In order to build faith, we need to remember that the Lord:

“Takes off the shackles put on by kings and ties a loincloth around their waist” (Job 12:18). “No one from the east or the west can exalt a man. But it is God who judges: He brings one down, he exalts another” (Ps 75:6-7).

“Changes times and seasons; He sets up kings and deposes them. He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the discerning “ (Da 2:21).

“Is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes and sets over them the lowliest of men.” (Dan 4:17, 32).

Government is the minister or servant of God. He established governing authorities to be ministers of wrath, to punish those who do unrighteousness. Our submission includes obeying the laws (Titus 3:1) and the financing of those laws through the payment of taxes (Ro 13:7). It is the same pattern in the Trinity and in the family . . . divine order!

## **THE CHURCH**

The Word is full of commands concerning our gathering together to worship. Emphasis is placed on the public demonstration of divine order as we join together to celebrate the Lord’s supper, to pray, to exhort, to sing and to enjoy fellowship. But do our assemblies reflect the divine order or do they reflect the best man can do?

Who is the head of the church? Paul writes “He is the head of the body, the church; He is

the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything He might have the supremacy" (Col 1:18); "God placed all things under his feet and appointed Him to be head over everything for the church" (Ep 1:22); "Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into Him who is the Head, that is, Christ" (Ep 4:15) and "The head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God." (1Co 11:3). Not a pastor or elder, not a denomination nor a general superintendent, not a bishop or an apostle but *Christ*, is the head of His church.

In the same way that Jesus submitted to His Father, in the same way that the wife is to submit to the husband, in the same way that children are to submit to their parents, in the same way that we are to submit to the governing authorities, the church is to submit to Him in all things. The public expression of our fellowship is to be an example of this submission in all that we do.

Flowing from Christ the Head, He appoints elders. Elders are supposed to be examples of the divine order at work. Notice the qualifications for elders and their job descriptions. 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:7-9 describe these men as men who are the heads of their houses, who have their houses in order (divine), whose wives and children are functioning in that order. 1 Peter 5:1-5 states that these elders are to lead by example, not by compulsion, providing oversight by their own faithful example of submission as well as their family's example of faithful submission. They are not to lord it over the fellowship, but following the example of the Lord, they are to lead exemplary lives of submission.

All of the commands of 1 Corinthians are the "how to" of expressing divine order publicly.

Don't get drunk, don't eat all of the food before others arrive, head coverings, women be silent, male leadership, the instructions concerning the gifts, and most importantly the instructions concerning the Lord's supper, are for the purpose of expressing the divine order. Like all of the Lord's commands, they are not subject to cultural or time considerations but are the continuing

expressions of His own submission.

### **EQUAL BUT SUBMITTED**

The Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost from eternity past lived in perfect society. We were created to fellowship with the Father. Sin broke that fellowship and instead of perfection our world became filled with chaos and death. In submission to His Father, the Son died so that we might again have fellowship with His Father. We are predestined to be conformed to His image. As a result, the Father created the family to work just like the Trinity. One head, the husband. God then created governing authorities and calls us again to submit to them. On the day of Pentecost, His church was born. The church is to operate just like the family and just like the Trinity. Divine order: In the Trinity, in the family, in government and in the church.

— Mike Indest

### **PART TWO: AN EXAMPLE OF DIVINE ORDER IN THE CHURCH**

Correctly applying 1 Corinthians 14:33b-35 is a challenge, especially for those involved with a house church that has interactive meetings. The text reads: “As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church” (1Co 14:33-35). Since this passage must be applied on a weekly basis, it is something that needs to be dealt with seriously and honestly. Before attempting to explain what this passage might mean, some general, preliminary observations about the text should first be made.

First, it was intended for all congregations everywhere. Specifically with regard to women’s silence, Paul made an appeal in 1 Corinthians 14:33b to a condition that was already true in “all the congregations of the saints.” This suggests that, whatever Paul wanted of the women, it was a universal practice. Further, he stated that the women should be silent in the “churches” (plural, 14:34). Since the Bible generally speaks philosophically of there being only one church per city,

the use of the word “churches” in the plural arguably referred to all other city-churches in existence at that time.

Second, this passage is not simply Paul’s uninspired opinion. Perhaps in anticipation of opposition to this instruction about the role of women during the interactive phase of the church gathering, Paul buttressed his command with the reminder: “If anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord’s command” (14:37). Then he warned, “If he ignores this, he himself will be ignored” (14:38). Thus, whatever this passage means, it is not merely Paul’s opinion. It is the Lord’s command. We dare not ignore it.

Third, the word “silent” is from *sigao* and means the absence of all noise, whether made by speaking or by anything else. It is insightful to note how *sigao* is used other places in 1 Corinthians 14. Tongue speakers were instructed to keep “quiet” (*sigao*, 14:28) if there was no interpreter present, and prophets were to “stop” (*sigao*, 14:30) if a revelation came to someone else. No statement to the church was to be made by either a tongues speaker nor a prophet under certain circumstances. Thus, whatever the correct application for women, there are times when a sister is not to address the gathered church. The core command is that women remain “silent” (14:34) during interactive church meetings.

Fourth, the context surrounding this passage concerns order during the interactive phase of the weekly Lord’s Day church gathering (1Co 14:40). The main reason the church gathers weekly is in order to be edified (1Co 14:4-5, 12, 26, Heb 10:24-25). The primary method to achieve this edification is through the fellowship of the Lord’s Supper as a full meal (see 1 Corinthians 11b). Like any large dinner event, it is a time when many conversations take place simultaneously and where no one person is singled out. Both men and women talk freely, relax, and fellowship at the same time over the meal. In the early church, as the fellowship feast finally drew to a close, the second phase of the meeting began. This second phase is described in 1

Corinthians 14. This is the time for teaching, singing, testimony, etc. The over-arching rule for this part of the meeting is that only one person at a time should address the congregation. All others are to listen quietly. Speaking is to be “one at a time” (14:27) and “in turn” (14:31). Thus, whatever this passage about silence means, it specifically concerns silence with respect to being the only one publicly speaking to the assembly. Logically, it would therefore not apply to congregational singing, corporate responses, or whispered private conversations, and certainly not to fellowship during the Lord’s Supper (1Co 11:17-35).

Fifth, the requirement for women to be silent with respect to speaking publicly to the gathered congregation is not a matter of ability, gifting, nor spirituality. Rather, it is a matter of divine order, obedience, and of putting others first for the sake of the advancement of the kingdom. For instance, a brother coming to the meeting prepared to speak in a tongue is required to hold back on the use his gift if no interpreter is present. A prophet may have a burning word that is genuinely from the Lord, but if another revelation comes to someone else, that first brother is to end his prophetic utterance. Similarly, Christian sisters are called upon to be silent in certain limited settings.

## **TWO VIEWS**

Among the authors of this book, two views prevail as to the exact meaning of the words in this passage. One is the “silent in judgment” view, which holds that a woman may indeed speak to the gathered church, except to verbally judge a prophecy that has been given. According to this view, a woman is to be silent only with respect to judging prophecy during the interactive phase of the church gathering. The other view is the “silent in public speaking” view, which understands the Bible to teach that there is never a time when a sister should address the 1 Corinthians 14 plenary assembly.

The “silent in judgment” view is quite popular with the church at large today. Historically, however, the “silent in public speaking” view has been the most commonly held position. What

all the authors of this book *do* agree upon is that God created men and women with divinely designed differences. Each gender is uniquely suited to the Lord's respective ministry and calling. We stand as one in support of God ordained roles for both men and women.

### **THE "SILENT IN JUDGMENT" VIEW**

With those favoring the "silent in judgment" view, 1 Corinthians 14:33b-35 ("remain silent") is taken to apply to the judging of the various prophecies mentioned in 14:29-33a. In 14:29a, Paul commanded that two or three prophets should speak; he then regulated the prophecy in 14:30-33a. Then, in 14:29b, Paul ordered that the prophecies be carefully judged. He next regulated the judgment in 14:30b-35. Thus, just as tongue speakers were to be "silent" under certain circumstances (14:28-i.e., only with regard to speaking in tongues when there was no interpreter present), and just as the prophets were to be "silent" under certain circumstances (14:30-i.e., only with regard to prophecy when another prophet received a revelation), so women were to remain "silent" under certain circumstances (14:33b-35 - i.e., only with regard to the judging of prophecies).

For women to judge prophecy in the church would be to assume an authoritative posture and, hence, would be to violate the requirement to be in submission found elsewhere in the Scriptures (1Ti 2:11-13). Notice how Paul links the silence of women in this passage to "submission" (14:34), indicating that this "silence" is in regard to exercising authority.

Accordingly, women are not authorized to quiz, question, or interrogate the prophets as to their orthodoxy. To do so would place them in a position of authority over the prophets. Instead, they should ask their own husbands at home, after the meeting, as to why certain prophecies might have gone unchallenged (14:35).

Also, those holding to the "silent in judgment" view regard 1 Corinthians 11 (about women prophesying) as occurring in a plenary, interactive church meeting. This is because the instructions immediately following this passage, 11:17-34 (concerning the Lord's Supper), clearly

do deal with a corporate church meeting. Thus, in 1 Corinthians 11:2, the Corinthians were praised for what they did rightly in their meetings, and in 1 Corinthians 11:7 they were chided for what they did wrongly in their meetings. The seeming contradiction that is thus created between 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 (women praying and prophesying) and 1 Corinthians 14:33b-35 (women not speaking) is resolved by understanding the “silence” in 1 Corinthians 14:33b-35 to be conditional. Women may speak if their statements are “in submission” (14:34). If, however, their utterances would entail passing judgment upon prophecies spoken in the meeting, then under this condition the women must be silent. Thus the sisters only have to be silent sometimes, but not always.

### **THE “SILENT IN PUBLIC SPEAKING” VIEW**

In support of the “silent in public speaking” view, notice the seeming absoluteness of 1 Corinthians 14:33b-35. The injunction seems crystal clear. And, as has already been shown, the Greek behind “silent” (*sigao*) genuinely means “mute.” This is in contrast to another word Paul could have used (*hesuchia*) which usually means “silent” in the sense of tranquil, calm, or settled down, but not necessarily mute (see its use in 2Th 3:12; 1Ti 2:2, 11-12). Moreover, as if to anticipate that someone might misunderstand the meaning of “women should remain silent in the churches”, Paul added the clarification that women “are not allowed to speak” (14:34). He did not limit it by specifying that they are not allowed to “speak in tongues” nor “speak a prophecy” nor “speak in judgment” nor “speak a teaching.” No qualifier was added. Evidently, the women are not to speak anything to the gathered assembly. In fact, they are not even to ask a question in church (14:35), because “it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.”

Gordon Fee, in the *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The First Epistle To The Corinthians*, observed that: “Despite protests to the contrary, the ‘rule’ itself is expressed absolutely. That is, it is given without any form of qualification. Given the unqualified nature of the further prohibition that ‘the women’ are not permitted to speak, it is very difficult to interpret this as meaning anything else than all forms of speaking out in public . . . the plain sense of the

sentence is an absolute prohibition of all speaking in the assembly” (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, pp. 706-707).

According to *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, “women were not to speak in public worship (33b-36) . . . The command seems absolute: Women are not to do any public speaking in the church” (Vol 10, pp. 275-276). Further, B.B. Warfield wrote that “precisely what the apostle is doing is forbidding women to speak at all in the church . . . It would be impossible for the apostle to speak more directly or more emphatically than he has done here. He requires women to be silent at the church meetings; for that is what “in the churches” means, there were no church buildings then” (“Women Speaking in the Church” in *The Presbyterian*, Oct. 30, 1919, pp. 8, 9).

Southern Baptist theologian John Broadus, commenting on 1 Corinthians 14:33-34 and 1 Timothy 2:11-15, stated, “Now it does not need to be urged that these two passages from the Apostle Paul do definitely and strongly forbid that women shall speak in mixed public assemblies. No one can afford to question that such is the most obvious meaning of the apostle's commands.” (*Should Women Speak In Mixed Public Assemblies?* Pamphlet published by Baptist Book Concern, Louisville, 1880).

An examination of first-century cultural norms would also suggest that Paul truly intended for women to be “silent in public speaking”. In Jewish synagogues, women were not allowed to speak publicly. Also, the secular Greek biographer, Plutarch, wrote that the voice of modest women ought to be kept from the public, and that they should feel as much shame over being heard as over being stripped (Reinecker, *Linguistic Key*, 438). Plutarch’s comments seem to reflect the common Greek/Roman sentiment of the day. Thus, if Paul had intended for women to be allowed to speak in church, would he then not have had to write extensively to convince his readers of such a counter-cultural practice? However, no such argument can be found in the New Testament. Instead, there is the command for silence; a command not based on the culture of Paul’s day, but upon the universal practice of all the churches and upon the Hebrew Scriptures

("as the Law says", 14:34). Paul certainly did assert the equality of the sexes in Galatians 3:28 (in contrast with first-century culture), but he still maintained the subordination of wives to their husbands (1Co 11, 14:34, Ep 5:22ff, ) and that leadership in the church should be male (1Ti 2:11-13, 1Ti 3, Tit 1).

What is the purpose for women being silence during 1 Corinthians 14 interactive meetings?

According to the text, their silence is a form of submission: "They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says." Old Testament Law obviously does not deal with women being silent in church meetings, but it does teach the submission of women to their husbands and it models male leadership in both religion and society. In a church situation where the whole church has come together in one place to be edified through teaching, praise, worship, testimony, and etc., the men are called upon to be the primary servant-leaders. The women are to practice a dynamic silence that encourages the men to speak out and practice their leadership.

The "silence in public speaking" view harmonizes the statements about women prophesying in 1 Corinthians 11 with 1 Corinthians 14 by noting that nowhere does the text specifically state that the prophesying of 1 Corinthians 11 has a plenary meeting of the church in view. The prayer and prophecy of 1 Corinthians 11 is thus understood to occur at a setting other than that of the plenary church assembly. The presence of the word "churches" (11:16) is taken to refer not to interactive church meetings, but to the consensus of the totality of Christians living in various geographic locations.

But what of the clear statement in 1 Corinthians 14:26 that "everyone" can speak in the meeting or that "you can all prophesy"? In many contexts the word "brothers" refers to both men and women. Other times, it refers only to believing men (as in 1Co 7:29, 9:5). It is a fluid term. Some argue that throughout the letter to the Corinthians, "brothers" refers to both men and women. Is this the case also in 1 Corinthians 14? Sailing into chapter 14, having begun in chapter 1, the flow would seem to indicate so. The readers, throughout 1Co 14, are addressed as either

“brothers” or “you” (2nd person pronoun). However, there is a significant and unexpected pronoun shift from “you” to “they” (3rd person pronoun) in the paragraph concerning women (14:33b-35). Rather than writing, “women . . .you”, the text states, “women . . . they.” Why did Paul not write directly to the sisters, if they were included in the term “brothers”?

This pronoun shift can be easily accounted for if the word “brothers” throughout 1Co 14 actually refers primarily to the men. The women would thus be referred to in 3rd person, since they are written about, rather than directly addressed. So, when it is stated that “all”, “anyone”, or “each one” of the brothers can participate in the interactive meeting (14:26), it may be specifically the men who are referred to. The women (“they”) are not to make comments designed for the whole church to hear. Interestingly, the *textus receptus* adds the word “your” before “women” in 14:34, further evidence that the term “brothers” throughout 1Co 14 specifically referred to the men and not the women. Since Paul had no hesitation about addressing women directly in other of his letters (for instance Euodia and Syntyche in Php 4:2), the fact that he did not here, in 1 Corinthians 14, makes the case above all the more compelling. Gordon Fee, in his commentary on this passage, observed, “all the previous directions given by the apostle, including the inclusive ‘each one’ of v. 26 and the ‘all’ of v. 31, were not to be understood as including women.” (p. 706).

## **CONCLUSION**

The women’s silence is both an object lesson and an application of the order that is to exist in the home and the church. It encourages the men to take the lead in the meeting, to be responsible for what goes on, to verbally participate, to begin to articulate their thoughts, to learn to be leaders, etc. One wife joyously observed that the quieter she was in the interactive church meeting, the more her passive husband spoke up and took the lead (cp. 1Pe 3:1-2). Sometimes those who “explain away” those passages of Scripture that seem to limit women’s roles in ministry fail to see the overall picture of God’s family order, set at creation, that

encompasses both the Old Covenant and the New. The church is primarily made up of families. For church order to contradict the order of the family (Ep 5) would be disorder and chaos. The Lord created and gifted men and women with complimentary ministry roles. Truly understanding God's order in both the family and the church causes us to realize that these "limiting passages" are not so much restrictive as protective. They protect women from the burden of leadership and of having to function as men. They also encourage men to be servant leaders. And, He is presenting to us a picture of Christ and His bride, the church, which is submissive to Christ as Head.

This is a serious issue with far reaching consequences regardless of how it is applied. We all have to do something about this passage at least on a weekly basis. My purpose in writing has been to offer a biblical alternative to the prevailing approaches that are common today, and not to attack those who hold views contrary to mine. For those reading this who have not made a decision on how to apply 1 Corinthians 14:33b-35, please realize that we cannot simply stick our heads in the sand and pretend it does not exist. As Paul warned, "If he ignore this, he himself will be ignored" (14:38).

— Steve Atkerson

*(For fuller treatments of this challenging subject, see the Articles section at [www.ntrf.org](http://www.ntrf.org))*

**19**

## **GROWING PAINS — GETTING TOO BIG**

### **PART ONE**

In the most common scriptural sense of the term, "the church" can never get too big. As long as the Lord leaves His people on this earth, it will always be His intent for the church to grow. And even in the sense of the true local church (all the truly redeemed ones in a locality) it is always God's intent for us to welcome growth as a blessing (try a Bible search on "multiply" for a sense of God's heart on numerical growth).

But what about a given congregation of saints meeting together regularly? Is it possible for such a gathering to become too large? In today's "church" paradigm, that hardly seems conceivable. After all, the goal is numerical growth, isn't it? Isn't growth evidence of spiritual health, of fulfilling the great commission? The bigger a "church" is, the more effective it must be, right? The more congregants in a "church," the more varied and specialized its programs can become, meeting more specific needs. Such assumptions as these are common, but do they really reflect God's desire for His house?

The growing number of Christians involved with house churches sense a longing for intimacy in fellowship with other believers around the Lord. And many have experienced the increasingly impersonal characteristics of program-centered "churches," especially as they become larger (or endeavor to seem larger than they are). Many have sensed the disconnect of being disenfranchised by the increasingly professional production that many churches aspire to provide in their "services."

"As for me and my house," I find compelling the scriptural arguments favoring churches meeting exclusively in private homes. Paul's insistence (in 1Co 4:16-17; 11:1-2, 16; 14:33; Ep 2:20; Php 3:17; 4:9; 2Th 2:15; 3:6-9; 1Ti 1:16; 1Ti 3:14-15; 2Ti 1:13) that the churches follow the apostolic "pattern" (and his own example) are persuasive arguments against the notion that where churches meet is not a matter of scriptural mandate.

Gathering around the Lord in an authentic way is so exciting, interesting, and enjoyable that numerical growth will likely result, in time, as saints mature corporately in their proficiency in letting the Holy Spirit lead their feasts/gatherings. So what should churches do when they grow to the point that they can no longer fit in a typical private home? How many is too big?

Jesus used an analogy (a parable - Mt 9:17; Mk 2:22; Lk 5:37-39) contrasting new and old wine and wineskins in defending His disciples' lack of fasting. Clearly the wine is more important than the wineskin, but the wrong wineskin can be detrimental to the benefit of the wine.

The function is more important than the form, but the wrong form can inhibit the intended function.

It is always risky (and thus sometimes questionable) to speculate on God's purposes for His acts. Yet He calls us to learn His ways (Ps 25:4; 51:13; 95:10). Let me cautiously ponder why the New Testament church was so consistently portrayed as gathering in homes. I suspect a key is to be found in Paul's explicit description of a church gathering in which all things are to be done "decently and in order" (1Co 14:40).

Throughout 1 Corinthians 14, Paul contrasts practices that are disorderly and confusing with those that are orderly and edifying. Interestingly, Paul's definition of orderliness is significantly different from what many of us would find comfortable, at least in a formal meeting (which may be a key to understanding the problem). Paul cautions against such confusing practices as speaking out in languages other people don't understand, having more than one person speaking at a time, having women lead, and other things focusing on one's own enjoyment rather than the benefit of the whole group. But then he contrasts these with descriptions of orderly, edifying corporate experiences.

For example, after portraying an inappropriate situation in which "an unbeliever or uninformed person" (presumably an uninformed believer) comes in where "the whole church comes together in one place, and all speak in tongues" and concludes "that you are all out of your mind" (1Co 14:23), Paul then describes the appropriate alternative. Interestingly, the better practice is not sitting still and listening to experts expound on scripture. Instead, Paul says (1Co 14:24-25) that "if *all* prophesy," this "unbeliever or uninformed person" will be "convinced by *all*" and "judged by *all*." The final outcome is that "falling on his face [this is orderly?] he will worship God and report that God is truly among you."

The incredible thing is that this prophetic participation by "all" is what Paul means by "decently and in order." He goes on to argue (verse 26) that when the brothers come together

"each one" brings something to "be done for edification." These things might include "a psalm," "a teaching," "a tongue," "a revelation," or "an interpretation." Note that this list includes things that could be planned ahead, but also things that couldn't likely be previously prepared.

A little later he says (verse 30) that if someone is speaking and "anything is revealed to another who sits by," the first speaker is to welcome the interruption and let the second brother speak. He continues with the phenomenal contention (verse 31) that "you can *all* prophesy one by one." At first glance this seems to contradict his directive two verses earlier to "Let two or three prophets speak and let the others judge." If only two or three can prophesy, yet he says "all" can prophesy, one possible interpretation is that there should only be two or three brothers present. Although I doubt this is the correct interpretation of the passage, it would certainly point to relatively small gatherings.

Actually, I suspect the correct interpretation is that the prophecies were to be voiced conversationally, among two or three brothers, with those listening in discerning whether or not they are hearing the voice of the Shepherd (Jn 10:3-5, 16, 27). This still sounds like a fairly intimate conversation, with some participating and the others leaning forward (inclining their hearts) as they listen with their ears and their spirits.

Even in the next section, where Paul addresses the women's dynamic silence (exerting unspoken pressure on the men to lead out), there is a sense of the interactive context of the gathering when he says (verse 35), "if they want to learn something, let them ask their own husbands at home." Apparently the men were to be free to interact during the gathering, asking questions. It is clear that the church gathering envisioned by the apostle was interactively participatory, personally intimate, and spontaneously led by the Holy Spirit, yet orderly in the sense that each person was to consider the good of the group rather than simply his own edification (considerate). A congregation is too large if "all" cannot participate intimately. An interesting thing about private homes is that they are seldom large enough to facilitate

gatherings of more than just a few families. I think we are wise, and cooperating with the Lord's ways, when we choose to design our homes to facilitate groups of saints to meet there. But is it possible the Lord ordained that churches gather house to house in order to keep the numbers relatively small? If so, we might be undermining His intent when we seek for larger facilities.

If I could build a house with a living room that could facilitate gatherings of 200 people, would that be an aide to the church? Or might I possibly be compromising the Lord's design to keep groups somewhat smaller? I doubt the Lord is pleased to have us set numerical limits. Yet it appears to me there is a general principle we should anticipate regarding the size of congregations gathering together intimately.

In 1993, for the fourth time, our family began meeting together with a couple of other families as a "church." Over the years the size of the group has grown, and sometimes diminished. At one point some of us felt we had reached a size that was too large for a home. I suggested that we consider finding some larger hall in which to meet, but the Lord used several of the other brothers to keep us from going down that path. It appears the Lord's provision for us at that time was to have the size of the group diminish. Over a relatively short period of time several of the families moved to other regions, thus relieving the pressure of dealing with the question of what to do if the congregation becomes too numerous to fit in a home.

Recently the Lord has once again brought growth to the circle of saints we're walking among. There are currently five participating families living in our community of Springfield, California, whose geographic proximity allows a frequency of contact encouraging us to walk together in relative intimacy (although we all recognize a longing for the Lord to work more in bonding our hearts together around Him). Two other families are currently in the process of moving here. Another two families living about a half-hour away have expressed a desire (and realistic intentions) to move here. Two other participating families live within a half hour of Springville, and another two families live nearly an hour and two hours away, but have attended

the weekly meetings for years. Finally, there are several other families who visit the weekly gatherings fairly often. (Those living further away are hindered from much of the "exhorting one another daily" experience of Hebrews 3:13, as a result of geographic limitations.)

We clearly are at a point where not all who want to gather with us can participate in a single meeting in a private home. If all the families who have identified as part of the congregation were present in one place, at one time, there would be ninety people. If any of the regular or infrequent visitors were present, that would be even more.

We want to hear the Lord's direction regarding what we should do regarding this situation.

We could try to plan a response, but the likelihood of resolving on an approach that He doesn't find pleasure in is very high. Solomon said (twice, Pr 14:12 & 16:25), "There is a way that seems right to a man, But its end is the way of death." Yet the Lord is apparently pleased to have us ponder His ways revealed in scripture, and anticipate what He will likely lead. Let's consider some possible approaches, that might (or might not) eventually be what the Lord leads.

Although I seriously doubt the Lord would have us find a larger meeting place to accommodate everyone, that is a possibility that others have felt is pleasing to the Lord. It is certainly a possibility, though a doubtful one.

We could simply do nothing. This could be of the Lord as we "Stand still and see the salvation of the LORD" (2Ch 20:17). It's quite possible the Lord would provide a solution without asking any of us to change what we have been doing at all. Or He might call us to bear the crowding with joy. Most of us have heard stories of congregations in third world countries where lots of folks gather in a very confined space. But as things are now, few of the families are willing to open their homes for gatherings, knowing there is no way everyone will fit. It seems to me the incentive to avoid hospitality is something we should seek the Lord to eliminate.

Another possibility (however remote) is that the Lord would lead us to limit the number of folks who are welcome to gather with us. We could do as some home school support groups do

and simply have a closed group, requiring any others who are interested in walking in the way the Lord is leading us, to find others to gather with. As doubtful as this option is to me, I want to leave the door open to whatever the Lord leads.

An option that has been discussed among many in the "house church" movement is the obvious possibility of multiplying by splitting a large group in two. This could be done based on geography, or it could be done based on some other method (casting lots, number or ages of family members, common interests, convictions, theology, etc.). It seems to me that distinguishing one church from another on the basis of anything other than geography is the kind of factiousness that Paul addressed in the first several chapters of 1 Corinthians. Choosing to fellowship only with folks who are similar to myself is a tacit acceptance of divisions in the body. If I must conclude that someone is truly a member of the body of Christ, I must also welcome fellowship with that person.

A couple of the families we gather with, who live quite a ways from many of the rest of us, have expressed fear that they might sometime be asked to split off and form a distinct group. Interestingly, if all the non-Springville families were to gather together, distinct from the Springville families (including those definitely moving here), the two groups would have exactly the same number of families. This is certainly a possibility the Lord could lead. However, my sense is that such an arbitrary division smacks of human manipulation rather than listening to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Yet in scripture geographic distinctions in the church were the one legitimate basis for unique church identity. The church in Antioch was one with the church in Jerusalem, but there was a sense in which they were distinct churches. There is only one body of Christ, made up of all believers of all time throughout the world. But there are distinct churches (plural) based on geography (not on human loyalties, distinctive practices, or unique theological positions). While we must admit that the modern church is splintered, the solution is to see the church from Jesus'

perspective. There is thus only one church in Springville, California, and all the Christians in Springville are part of the church in Springville. Even all the Christians in the church of Springville can't possibly (and, I believe, shouldn't) meet regularly in one place. If we don't meet in one place because there are too many of us, how do we decide who meets where? Another possibility is scheduling meetings at different times, and welcoming folks participating in the meetings that best fit their schedule and preferences. Certainly this is an approach that is considered a "no-brainer" for institutional "churches" that outgrow their "sanctuary." We could have an "early service" and a "late service." (I'm almost gagging as I write this.) Folks could choose which love feast they want to participate in. They might alternate participation, and even occasionally enjoy both feasts. Perhaps several of the brothers who sense a special calling to provide oversight to the congregation could particularly make it a point to participate in both groups.

These are exciting times, as we find the Lord leading us in paths that are distinct from the traditions that have been set over the centuries. May we humble ourselves before the Lord, acknowledging that we can't figure out the best approaches, and that we are utterly dependent upon the Holy Spirit's leading, in order to truly be a pleasure to our Bridegroom.

— Jonathan Lindvall

## **PART TWO**

It can reasonably be expected that a body of believers that walks with the Lord and radiates light into a dark community will attract new members. As a house church grows numerically, space will be at a premium. Historically, believers have solved this "problem" (and it is a good problem to have!) by erecting bigger and bigger buildings to hold more people. However, the New Testament pattern is not to build special buildings in order to accommodate more people than can fit into a typical living room. Yet there is no New Testament pattern for a house church dividing, either. The apostolic witness is silent about how the early church accommodated

growth. Unless some other existing New Testament pattern is violated, this ultimately is a matter of freedom in the Lord.

Understandably, people resist dividing because the prospect of lost relationships is just too painful. Others fear that a lack of qualified leaders in the new group may result in disaster. Another concern is that in a new, pioneering work, those on the fringes will leave the church (pioneers can have a rough life). Yet another reason to resist dividing is the concern that the new church may make decisions that are contrary to the earlier decisions of the original church; that future diversity may lead to conflict. All these can be valid concerns. And, it must be emphasized that no one should be pressured, forced or ordered into doing anything regarding where they participate in church. Church government is to be by consensus, not command. Poor reasons to divide include: to host so many people is just too much trouble to prepare for; there are too many wild kids to keep up with; minor theological differences make it easier to leave than to work out or tolerate. Motives are important. Why do you want to divide? Are your motives selfish or to greater serve the body of Christ?

On the other hand, it may be time to consider a new work when, on a regular basis, so many folks attend the 1 Corinthians 14 meeting that it becomes difficult for everyone who so desires to participate. Or because so many are in attendance that the typical home simply cannot accommodate them all (no place to sit). Also, an ever larger group will necessarily result in some loss of intimacy and accountability (a network of only so many friends can be maintained). Having a smaller church will also encourage the more timid to speak up and begin to learn how to be servant-leaders themselves (increased on the job training).

Ultimately, it becomes a capacity issue. If a church wants to be used of God to be more and more of a blessing to others, new comers must somehow be welcomed and accommodated. For starters, there must be room for them to sit down! The only long-term biblical solution for this is to begin a new church. Ideally, the new church will have qualified leaders in it, maintain close

contact with the founding church, have gifted teachers present, musicians, folks willing to host the church in their home, a good mix of young and old, etc. But, that is the ideal. Not all of these are necessary. The main requirement is for some type of mature leadership and oversight to be present (either through an apostle or from the mother church). And as mentioned above, there should be not an arbitrary nor contrived nor pressured assignment of who goes where, or when. In most well established churches there are usually the truly **committed**, who come out of **convenience** but who don't really believe in following New Testament patterns, those who live nearby and form the **core community**, those who **commute** in from long distances, those who are **celibate** (singles), and also some **coaches** (elders). This mix should be taken into consideration by the leadership when pondering the birthing of a new church out of an existing church.

In sum, a church has several options once its seating capacity is reached:

- 1.** Remain the same and cease to grow numerically. In this scenario, newcomers will eventually be resented and seen as problems. Sensing this, visitors will either not come back a second time or soon leave for a more welcoming fellowship. Surely this is not God's way! The kingdom, like the yeast hidden in the bread dough, is bound to grow and spread. Let us work with God, not against Him.

- 2.** Erect ever bigger buildings to house more people. This is the most commonly chosen option, but it violates the New Testament pattern. The problem is that too many people present in a single church begin to hinder the purpose for even having a church meeting in the first place. Size is not necessarily an indication of strength (blubber is not muscle). 1 Corinthians 14 meetings become impossible (which is how "worship services" got started). The Lord's Supper as a full meal can still be carried out, but it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to speak with everyone present during the course of the meal since so many are present. Intimacy is lost, and accountability begins to suffer. Dealing with the various "issues" that people have grows problematic. The church becomes more like a business than a family.

3. Divide the church somewhat evenly, splitting strengths and weaknesses as evenly as possible, as folks are led by the Spirit (and not coerced).

4. Send out smaller parties (subsets) from the main group to start new works. For example, two thirds stay, one third goes out. The subset forming the new church will have a God-given burden to do so; no arm twisting would ever be in order.

At the end of the day, one must ask, "What is the mind of the Lord on this? What is God's will for our church?" Lets stay tuned to His frequency and see what He has to say!

— Steve Atkerson

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### **CHURCH TRADITIONS**

It is amazing to realize, though nevertheless simply a fact, that Jesus' conflict with Israel's religious leaders was *not* over the Mosaic Law. Jesus kept the Old Covenant to the letter, and apart from one rather embarrassing attempt to trip Him up using the occasion of a woman being caught in adultery, those who sought to do battle against Him did so for entirely other reasons. What made them so angry with Jesus wasn't that He went against anything in the Old Testament Scriptures, because He patently didn't, but rather that He challenged and went against something called the tradition of the elders.

We therefore read in Mark's Gospel, "Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, 'Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?'" (Mk 7:1-5). So what, precisely, is going on here? The answer is that

whereas in *theory* Israel considered the Old Testament scriptures to be its final authority in matters of both faith and practise, the *reality* was somewhat different. The Jews actually paid far more heed to a system of teaching and practice known as 'the tradition of the elders', or 'the Oral Law'.

Pharisaic Judaism taught that when Moses was on Mount Sinai he was given not one, but two laws by God. The written law, or Mosaic Law, was recorded in the pages of the Old Testament. However, a second, secret law was said to have been passed on purely orally down through the generations. This secret law allegedly only came to public light in the years preceding the time of Jesus. When the inevitable conflict between these two laws and what they taught came about, Israel had to eventually decide which one was their actual final authority. After all, you may claim to have two things equally as your final authority (in this case the Old Testament and the Oral Law), but you can really only have one, and it is that which you obey once the contradictions between the two emerge. Incredibly, Israel went with the Oral Law (the tradition of the elders), and relegated the Mosaic Law, and thereby the Old Testament scriptures, to second place. Indeed, the Pharisees taught, and quite unashamedly too, that it was more punishable to act against the tradition of the elders than the Old Testament scriptures.

What we must therefore understand is that, at the time of Jesus, the nation of Israel lived under the authority of a system of teachings and practices which, in numerous and vitally important ways, went completely against other teachings and practices laid down in the Old Testament. Yet they did so whilst claiming to have been led to do so by God Himself, this being under the pretext that this Oral Law had supposedly been given to Moses by Him. A system of completely man-made and merely humanly originated teachings and practises had therefore usurped and replaced the revealed truth of the written Word of God, yet under the claim that, even though they contradicted the Old Testament Scriptures, such traditions and teachings had nevertheless come from the Lord God of Israel Himself.

However, if we ask what the Lord God of Israel thought about this (supposedly) inspired Oral Law, then all we have to do is to look at Jesus' responses to it: "He said to them, 'Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.' You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition'" (Mk 7:6-8). Hypocrisy! That was the Lord's clear and unwavering verdict on such traditions as were causing His people to go against the inspired traditions as revealed in the Word of God. To hold to merely humanly originated practice, whatever it may be, as opposed to biblical practice is, according to the Lord Jesus Christ, to "abandon the commandment of God".

I think you'll agree that this is pretty heavy duty stuff, and I can imagine the kind of responses even now being elicited from my readers: "Amen brother! That's terrible what Israel did!" "Imagine that! Israel going against the Mosaic Law in favor of their own man made teachings and practises and traditions. No wonder God judged them!" "What? Abandoning the commandment of God by holding to merely human tradition? Unthinkable!" But I have to tell you that, for virtually two millennia, we Christians have been doing exactly the same thing. It is incredible beyond words to realize, though nevertheless also simply a fact, that when it comes to our experience of church life, by which I mean the traditions, or established practice, which the vast majority of Christians unquestioningly follow and implement, virtually all of it is based on a system of practices which, just like Israel's tradition of the elders, has nothing whatsoever to do with the Word of God. Far from being what we see revealed in the pages of the New Testament, it rather originated from, and was implemented by, men who came on the scene after the Apostles of Jesus were dead and therefore after the writing of the New Testament was completed.

What needs to be understood here is that these traditions are not just different from what we see in Scripture in the sense of being merely variations. They actually equate to being the

complete opposite of what we see in the New Testament. Far from being mere developments whereby biblical practices are applied in slightly different ways in differing circumstances and conditions, they are rather practices which, not only are nowhere found in the New Testament, but are actually at complete variance with what it teaches and go against it in virtually every possible respect. They are practices that cause those adhering to them to go completely and directly against what we see revealed in the Word of God, the very thing Jesus so unwaveringly and blatantly condemned.

I am going to make some simple observations now which no Bible commentator, scholar or historian worth his salt would challenge. They pertain to the way in which churches in New Testament times were set up and organized according to the traditions passed on by the Apostles of Jesus, and as revealed in their writings — the very New Testament itself. I am simply going to describe what it was like when a group of believers met together as a church, as revealed in the pages of Scripture. And let me emphasize this point: revealed so clearly that, as already mentioned, no scholar would challenge it.

Let's go back in time to the midway point of the first century and take a glimpse at what church was like in New Testament times. And the immediate thing to say is that, when you went to the coming together of the particular church you were part of, you would have found yourself, quite unfailingly, going to someone's house. Numbers would therefore be small, and you would be part of a small and intimate group of people who knew you, and who you knew, very well. Extended family would be the idea that best summed it up, and the general tenor of the gathering would, at all points, have been that of intimate informality. When you thus came together with your brothers and sisters, two things would have happened.

Firstly, though this is not meant to imply any set chronological order, there would be a time of sharing together during which all were free to take part as they felt the Lord was leading. From worshipful singing to prayer and intercession. From bringing a teaching, to declaring a

prophesy. From sharing a burden to speaking a word of knowledge or wisdom — all would be free to take part. No one led the proceedings from the front. Indeed, being in someone's lounge with everyone sitting face to face around the room, as opposed to being in rows merely looking at the back of someone's neck, there is no front to lead from. All is of a spontaneous, free, unstructured and Spirit-led nature. The atmosphere is that of worshipful, reverent and informal joy.

Then secondly, everyone present would have eaten a meal together. In fact, you would eat the main meal of the day together. Part of this meal would have been a loaf of bread and a cup of wine that everyone shared in common, this reminding the assembled church that Jesus is the guest of honor and that, though an ordinary shared meal, this was also a very special shared meal: the Lord's Supper and Table. This, the covenant meal of individual believers gathered as a corporate church, would have been what bound you all together as an extended family of God in whatever area you were located.

There is something else you would most likely notice as well, and it is that any leadership such as existed is a very, low-key affair indeed, and far more of a back seat thing rather than anything up front or high profile. Further, it would be seen purely as functional and would not in any way be thought of as being positional with official titles and the like. Moreover, it would also have been plural. Any idea of one man being in charge of a church would have been a completely foreign thought to those gathered. Something else these men would have had in common (for leaders were always men in the New Testament churches) was that they all originated from that same church. They were home grown guys. Indigenous local lads who everyone in the church knew extremely well. As for designation (for there were no official titles) these men were variously called elders, overseers or bishops (depending on which translation of the Bible you read) and pastors or shepherds (again, depending on translation), each being synonymous terms for the same people. Those with various other ministries (apostles, prophets,

teachers, etc.) might sometimes pass through in order to help out here and there, and as invited, but they would eventually move on to other places. The only ongoing leadership in the church would have been these local home grown older brothers. They ensured that the format was always that of open and spontaneous free participation, and leading from the front was the last thing they wanted to do for the simple reason that they had been taught by the Apostles that such was not the Lord's will.

That is what church gatherings were like whilst the teachings and traditions of the Apostles, as revealed to us in the pages of the New Testament, held sway. Further, and do please underline this in red ink, I repeat what I wrote earlier: no Bible commentator, scholar or historian worth his salt would question this description in any significant way. I have simply laid out what, as simple matters of fact, is to be seen in the New Testament. Scripture reveals only one prescribed way in which believers were taught to come together as churches and to do things. So how do we do things today when we come together as churches? (In fact, how have believers been doing it for pretty much the whole of church history?) As pointed out earlier, we don't just do things differently, we do things virtually exactly the opposite!

For a start, we meet in large numbers in public buildings. Let me ask: Is that merely a variation on meeting in small numbers in private homes? No, it is the exact opposite!

Secondly, we have services which are led from the front by (usually) professional paid leaders, which positively ensures that all are not free to partake as the Spirit leads. Tell me, is that merely a variation on an open and completely participatory gathering without leadership from the front and with all free to take part? No, it is the exact opposite!

Thirdly, after the main service (and we have just seen that the New Testament churches didn't have anything that even vaguely resembled worship services) we tack on another one — a ritual with bread and wine. Again I ask, is that merely a variation on having a meal together?

No, it's a totally different thing altogether! It is something that would have been completely alien

to the Apostles who taught the churches to share a meal together. Indeed, the very Lord's Supper! (The Greek word employed in scripture, *deipnon*, means the main meal of the day towards evening.)

Lastly, though there are other things I could have included but space doesn't allow, how do we go about conducting leadership? What does it look like in our churches as opposed to the churches back then? Well, we bring in hierarchical and positional leadership from the outside in the shape of an individual with an official title of some kind. That is, we usually go for variations on the theme of having one man at the top — and virtually always a paid professional brought in from the outside as well. Compare that with non-positional, plural, home-grown brothers who aren't professionally salaried, and again I ask: Is that merely a variation of some kind? Is it just tinkering at the edges and moving things round a little? No, it is the complete opposite of the way the church did things as taught by the Apostles of Jesus. Where did they get their ideas from? From the Lord Himself!

We need to be aware too that it is irrelevant as to which church we are talking about here. Whether Catholic or Presbyterian, Anglican or Baptist; whether Pentecostal or Methodist; whether Episcopalian or Free Evangelical, when it comes to church practice all are similarly based on the same traditions and teachings of men who appeared after the canon of scripture was closed, and who taught practices that go against the revealed Word of God. All the aforementioned churches are based in buildings, with religious services and bread and wine rituals, and all likewise practice leadership that flies in the face of what we see revealed in Scripture. In other words, though different from each other in matters of detail, all are nevertheless exactly the same as each other regarding the point of church practice and do the opposite of what Scripture patterns.

The Early Church Fathers (as history has named the men who took on the leadership of the Christian churches in the years and generations after the Apostles died) did much good and were

greatly used by God. But in the things we are looking at here they erred badly. I, and many others, are now asking that we reject and renounce the false practices which they introduced (though not the biblically sound things they did and taught), and that we therefore reject too the heritage of the completely unbiblical church life and experience they have subsequently bequeathed to us. As I have already made clear, no one who knows their biblical stuff would challenge my description of New Testament church life and practice in contrast to the way in which the Fathers changed things. However, what I am further maintaining, and here is where the debate is raging, is that they were wrong to teach what they taught concerning church life and practice, and that we have likewise been wrong through the centuries to have continued with it all.

Israel disobeyed the Old Testament at various points because of their beloved, yet totally wrong and unbiblical, tradition of the elders. The Christian Church has done exactly the same thing, only with the tradition of the Early Church Fathers. In England we call that a doublewhammy, and it's time we started to put it right. What are we going to go with? The traditions of death? Or the traditions of the Divine? I leave you, dear reader, to decide for yourself!

— Beresford Job

## **CONCLUSION**

Throughout history, God has raised up men to call the church to obedience, action, or accountability. Such men have often found themselves in the age-old struggle of whether to remain within the system and attempt to rebuild the church from within (as Puritans), or whether to leave it and follow the Lord in unfettered obedience (as Separatists). Good men have taken both approaches.

During the 1500s there were two church reformations going on simultaneously. The more famous Protestant reformation was headed by such men as Martin Luther and John Calvin. (Though Luther began as a Puritan, he was forced into Separatism when the Catholic Church

excommunicated him.) These Protestant reformers helped restore the theology (orthodoxy) of the church to such Biblical teachings as salvation by grace through faith. To them we are deeply indebted.

However, the reformers did not completely rebuild church practice (orthopraxy). Just as Constantine (a fourth century “Christian” Roman emperor) had turned pagan temples into Christian cathedrals, the Protestants largely just turned Catholic cathedrals into Protestant ones. Less famous (and to some, more infamous) was the so-called Radical reformation. These reformers also desired to see God’s church restored to its New Testament origins, not just in its theology, but also in its practice. They were called “radical” by their persecutors, “radical” in the sense of being “extreme” or even unbalanced. Their persecutors, sadly, were both the Catholics and the Protestants (which, based on Jn 13:34-35, qualifies them as somewhat “infamous” themselves). But just how balanced were some of God’s greatest servants? How balanced was Jeremiah, who went around continually wailing? What of Ezekiel, who laid down on his left side for over a year, and then turned over to his right side for forty days? And then there was Isaiah, who went naked for three years. Do these men sound balanced to you? When it comes to obeying Scripture, “radical” is what the Lord expects!

As the unbelieving Jewish establishment persecuted the early church, as the Catholics persecuted the Protestants, as both Catholics and Protestants persecuted the Anabaptists, and as the Anglicans persecuted the Baptists, so too you can expect at least some degree of opposition when you opt to take a stand for Truth. Be glad and rejoice! Great will be your reward in heaven (Mt 5:12).

The journey before you may well be a difficult one. Disillusionment, loneliness, discouragement and disappointment potentially lie in wait. In such times, remember to look to the Lord to work His power through your weakness. Besides, it is *His* church anyway and ultimately *His* problem. Jesus isn’t worried about anything!

In order to have any real hope for success in achieving New Testament church life, at least two things are necessary from the core group. First, there must be an absolute, resolute and unshakable love for Jesus that is expressed an absolute, resolute and unshakable commitment to obey all His commands. Thus, God’s Word must be held up as the inerrant authority governing all that is said, thought, or done. Second, the core group must possess an undying love for the brethren. Unless there is a total commitment to both the Lord and His people, any house church is in serious trouble (see Jn 14:15, 21-24 15:9-17).

We must love Jesus enough to bring our churches into compliance with everything Jesus commanded. We must also love the brethren enough to put up with their faults, shortcomings and shortsightedness. People do have problems. No one is perfect. Thus, rebuilders must be patient, long suffering and understanding of others in the fellowship.

As it turns out, “extreme” is not the only meaning of “radical.” It is from the Latin *radix* and simply means “root.” The Radical reformers wanted to go back, past Constantine, past the early church fathers, all the way to the church’s New Testament roots. Let’s join in and help complete all that was good about both reformations. After the Hebrews had been in Babylonian captivity for seventy years, God providentially raised up a pagan ruler who was inclined to grant the Jews freedom to return to their Promised Land. Few, however, found it convenient to return home. Babylon was just too comfortable and Jerusalem too devastated. Only a minority, led by Nehemiah, Ezra, and Zerubbabel, ventured forth to rebuild that which had been lost. A similar choice is facing you. Regardless of whether you opt to be a Puritan or a Separatist, will you help rebuild the church, or will you settle for second best?

— Steve Atkerson

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#### **ABOUT NTRF**

The New Testament Restoration Foundation is part of a growing body of believers who have come to see the importance of following New Testament church patterns. We have taken to heart the evangelical belief that the Bible is our final authority, not only in matters of faith, but also in matters of practice. We see theological significance in the distinctive traditions of the apostolic church.

The word "restoration" in our name does not reflect a belief on our part that the true church somehow ceased to exist after the time of the apostles. God has guided and preserved His elect throughout the years. We are deeply indebted to those who have gone before us and thankfully stand on their shoulders. The idea of "restoration" comes from our desire to see New Testament practices (*orthopraxy*) restored to today's church, just as New Testament theology (*orthodoxy*) was restored during the Reformation.

We seek to aid others in recapturing the intimacy, simplicity, accountability and dynamic of the first century church. Our goal is to provide resources and training in how the early church met together in community. We are glad to mail out our materials at no charge to those who can

not help us with our expenses. Production costs are listed for those who are able to co-labor with us through voluntary giving.

All materials produced by the Foundation are consistent the Doctrines of Grace, New Covenant Theology, the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy and the Denver's Statement on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood. The essential tenants of the faith to which we subscribe are identical to those found in the doctrinal statements of any sound evangelical institution. One of our favorite statement of faith is the First London (Baptist) Confession of 1644.

### ***NTRF PUBLICATIONS***

- ***Ekklesia, To The Roots Of Biblical Church Life*** — An introductory book covering most topics related to New Testament church life: the Lord's Supper as a full meal, interactive meetings, consensus government, home-based churches, the importance of following New Testament patterns, the ministry of elders, full-time workers, integrating church and family, church discipline, giving, etc. (It replaces *Toward A House Church Theology*, now out of print).

- ***Radio Talk Show Broadcast: House Churches*** — A cassette recording of a radio call-in talk show about New Testament styled house churches. Great for introducing other believers to New Testament church life!

- ***Searching for the New Testament Church*** — A six tape audio cassette series that is both practical and theological in dealing with the main issues of New Testament church life (apostolic tradition, church government, church meetings, the Lord's Supper, house churches). A good resource for listening to while driving.

- ***The Practice of The Early Church: A Theological Workbook*** — A learner's workbook that will guide you to and through every major topic in the New Testament about church life. Covered are such issues as apostolic tradition, the Lord's Supper, interactive meetings, consensus governing, church discipline, home fellowships, women in ministry, baptism, the Lord's Day, elders, apostles, and giving. It is arranged in a Socratic (questioning) format.

• ***The Practice of The Early Church: Leader's Guide*** — A in-depth teacher's resource for use in conjunction with the learner's workbook (above). The Leader's Guide is designed to help someone lead a series of interactive discussions on what the Bible says about our Lord's church using the Workbook (above). The Leader's Guide contains Greek word studies, historical data, illustrations, the answers to the harder Workbook questions, suggested applications and other information for effectively leading a group study.

• ***Equipping Manual*** — A one year study course designed to help equip believers for effective service. It covers Christian basics: how to study the Bible, salvation, evangelism, the origin and authority of the Scriptures, the "big picture" of the Bible, how to teach interactively, etc. Designed for use by teachers in a group setting, it is not really suited for self-study.

• ***House Church Weekend Workshops*** — NTRF teams are available to conduct weekend workshops on God's design for His church. For more information, contact us through the web site [WWW.NTRF.ORG](http://WWW.NTRF.ORG).

• ***Traditions*** — A six tape audio cassette series by London house church elder Beresford Job that traces the rise of many church traditions common today that actually have no basis in the Scriptures, and which often times go directly against the commands of God.

• ***Annual Southern House Church Conference Tapes*** — Cassette tapes from the previous year's plenary sessions.

• ***Putting Our House (Churches) In Order*** — This four tape cassette series deals with some excesses and abuses within the house church world: mysticism, pragmatism, charismaniacs, cessationist extremism, guruism and feminism.

Many of our resources can be downloaded directly off the internet.

[WWW.NTRF.ORG](http://WWW.NTRF.ORG)

### ***Free Gifts***

Who doesn't like to receive a free gift? We have two gifts to tell you about. The first is a

copy of the book you are holding in your hand, *Ekklesia*. If you do not have the means to help us offset our expenses in distributing these books, we are glad to send you your own copy for free, *gratis*, no charge. Just e-mail us. Our interest is in seeing the advance of God's kingdom, not in selling books! Of course if you can assist us in the area of giving, that would be greatly appreciated and enables us to continue our ministry.

The second gift we would like to tell you about is of infinitely greater worth than any free book offer. Yet it is from a book that we first learned of this gift ourselves. The Bible is God's Word to believers. The focus of the Bible is the person and work of God's Son, Jesus Christ. It is in the Bible that we discover the free gift of God: "eternal life in Christ Jesus" (Romans 6:23).

### **THE GOOD NEWS**

In John 5:39 Jesus said, "The Scriptures bear witness of Me." Here, He was referring to the Old Testament, Genesis through Malachi. When Moses wrote the first five books of the Old Testament (Genesis—Deuteronomy), Jesus noted, "He wrote about Me" (John 5:46). After His resurrection, Jesus met two of His disciples and encouraged them by saying, "All the things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." When you read the Old Testament, look for promises about Jesus Christ: He is the Seed who crushes Satan's head; He is the Lamb of God; He is the Prophet we must listen to; He is the Priest who offers Himself up to God; He is the King who rules His people.

In the New Testament, the Gospel has come and commands us to believe in Christ, the One God promised in the Old Testament and sent in the fullness of time. What is the Gospel? The Gospel is the "Good News" that through belief in the death, burial and resurrection of Christ we can have forgiveness of sin and eternal life (1 Corinthians 15:3-4).

But why did Jesus have to come into this world? He came because of our sin problem — we do things that displease God. But why are we sinful? Because the first people God created, Adam and Eve, fell into sin (they disobeyed God's revealed will), and as a result we are born as sinners,

and experience the wages of our sin: death and eternal condemnation (Genesis 3:1-19; Romans 5:12; 3:23; John 3:18).

Because of our sinfulness, we are alienated from God. He is holy (without sin) and cannot allow wickedness in His presence. But Jesus was a very special person. He was both God and man. Because he was God, He never once sinned. He always pleased His heavenly Father, and gave His life as payment for His people's sin. Being both God and man, He could mediate between a holy God and a sinful people (1 Timothy 2:5). His shed blood provided an atonement (covering) so that sinners could be forgiven and justified. The third day after His crucifixion, Jesus was glorified and exalted forever when His Father raised Him from the dead. For forty days, He appeared alive to many witnesses and then ascended to heaven to take His place at the right hand of the Father where He is now ruling and reigning over His kingdom and making intercession for His people (Acts 1:9; Romans 8:34). Those who die in faith will be resurrected to everlasting life when Jesus returns in the fullness of His glory at the end of the present age. They will be joined by believers who are still alive and together will receive the kingdom promised to them. All who have not obeyed the gospel's call for repentance and belief in his name — whether dead or alive when He returns — will stand before His righteous court to be condemned to everlasting punishment. (2 Thessalonians 1:8-10).

After His resurrection, Jesus said that repentance from sin and forgiveness of sin must be proclaimed to all nations (Luke 24:47). When people look to Jesus by faith for the forgiveness of sins, they must also repent of their sins. Repentance means that a person has godly sorrow for his or her sins and turns from evil in order to practice righteousness (2 Corinthians 7:1). Paul captured this gospel truth when he noted of the Thessalonian believers, "You turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven" (1 Thessalonians 1:9-10).

All who stop trusting in their works — in anything they do — to be right with God, and look

by faith to Jesus Christ as their substitute are accepted by God. God no longer sees the sins of those who believe in Christ, but sees the perfect life and work of His Son (Romans 3:21; 5:18-19). The New Testament calls this "justification" — God accepting sinful people on the basis of Christ's finished work (Romans 4:1-8). In Luke 18, Jesus told the story of a tax-collector who was convicted of his sinfulness. He did not compare himself to others. He knew his best efforts could not satisfy God's righteous demands. Instead, he beat upon his breast and cried, "God be merciful to me, the sinner." Jesus said, "I tell you, this man went back to his home justified" (Luke 18:14).

In order to stand before God we must be holy. Since we are very unholy in His sight, we must look outside of ourselves to Jesus, Who alone is holy and perfect. We will all stand before God's judgment some day. We will either stand there in our sins and be condemned, or stand before Him clothed in the righteousness (perfection) of Christ.

All of us tend to think that God will accept us into His presence because of something we do. Perhaps we think that if our good deeds outweigh our bad deeds, He will accept us on Judgment Day. But it is only what Jesus did that God accepts. God only accepts people who are "in Christ." We can only come to God through His Son. Have you ceased from your own works and rested your soul in the work of Christ? Are you trusting in Christ's life, death, burial and resurrection as the only acceptable means to your salvation? May the Holy Spirit bring you to cry out, as did the tax-collector, "God be merciful to me the sinner, through your Son, Jesus Christ!"

## **BAPTISM**

After His resurrection, Jesus said, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20).

If you have faith in Jesus for salvation, you have become His disciple. Jesus has commanded

that His disciples be baptized with water. It was promised that after Jesus' resurrection, He would "baptize with the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 3:11). On the Day of Pentecost, the exalted Jesus poured out the Holy Spirit upon His people (Acts. 2:33). That day about 3,000 people believed in Jesus, and those who received the word of the Gospel were baptized with water (Acts 2:41).

When the Gospel extended beyond the Jews to the Gentile nations, "the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out" upon them also, and Peter said, "Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just like we did" (Acts 10:45, 47).

"Since we have a great high priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water" (Hebrews 10:21-22). If you are a believer now, you could be baptized by the person who first shared Jesus with you, or by someone in the group of believers with whom you are fellowshiping.

#### **FOLLOWING JESUS CHRIST**

Jesus said to all who had come to Him for salvation, "Take up your cross and follow Me" (Matthew 16:24). The apostle Paul asserted that Christ died so that all His people should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died for them (2 Corinthians 5:15). If you have indeed come to Christ for salvation from your sins, you will desire to live a life that pleases Him and not yourself. Because He loved you first, you will love Him and love his people fervently and keep his commandments (1 John 4:7-11, 19-20).

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