

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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What Happened When Christians Gathered?

by Dan Trygg

“They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayers. ⁴⁶...from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and openness of heart...” Acts 2:42,46

“On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul began talking to them...” Acts 20:7

“What is the outcome then, brethren? When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification.” 1 Corinthians 14:26

We have been working through a series on the calling and nature of the church. **At Caesarea Philippi, when Peter confessed that Jesus was the Christ (Messiah), He affirmed that confession, and went on to talk about how He intended to build His *ekklēsia* from those who would come to recognize and commit to Him as their King.** The word, *ekklēsia* was a term that was used in the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures to describe an assembly of people, called-out for a purpose. There was another Greek word, *synagōgē*, that was used for the religious gatherings. *That* term (synagogue) had been chosen by the Jews to identify the religious meetings and buildings that were specifically identified with their faith. **By choosing to refer to those who would follow Him as their King as an *ekklēsia*, Jesus identified them with the OT people of faith, but differentiated them from the religious institutions and practices of Judaism of His day.**

Jesus often did things that challenged the status quo. For example, He went around teaching, preaching, and making disciples, but **He was *not* a typical rabbi.** He had no formal schooling. He had not been attached to any other rabbi. **And He did not operate as other religious leaders did. He challenged accepted practices, called out the excesses and abuses of many of the rabbis of the time.** They were always jockeying for recognition, and commendation from respected people. Jesus did not play their political games. **He preached truth, ...calling out and confronting hypocrisy, while proclaiming a message of grace, repentance, and forgiveness to the poor, broken, and even notorious sinners. He went about doing good, proclaiming this gospel, healing the sick, casting out demons, and calling people to believe in Him.**

And the disciples He recruited, ...they were people from blue collar backgrounds, nobodies and even a low-life tax collector. Not only did He spend extended time with them, He included them in His ministry work, and even sent them out to represent Him. While other rabbis kept a respectable distance of propriety *above* their disciples, Jesus did no such thing. **He not only travelled and ate with them, ...He also hung out with tax collectors and sinners.** Jesus was known for His compassion and acceptance, without ever compromising truth.

So, we should not be surprised to see that the apostles incorporated these dynamics and values into the training meetings they had with new disciples. For a brief time, they were able to preach to interested onlookers in the back porch area of the Temple, but **the main focus of the follow-up and training of those who were choosing to follow Jesus took place in smaller meetings, usually in a home. These meetings included teaching, food, sharing, and prayer.**

If we were to visit a NT church gathering, ...an *ekklēsia* of those days..., what would we see?

The first thing we would notice is that *there would be FOOD!* The phrase, “breaking of bread”, did not refer to the Lord’s supper, ...it was a common term for having a meal (cf. Lk. 24:30-35). **The Christians gathered to share a meal together, as a way to celebrate one another, the Lord’s goodness, and to foster a relaxed setting conducive to sharing. The “Lord’s supper” would be part of this, ...either at the beginning, or at the conclusion of the meal.** Whatever bread or drink was available would serve for this purpose. Usually it was bread and wine, common staples of the day, but sometimes water was used, when wine was not available. **The meal and celebrating of communion were so tied together that they referred to the entire event as “the *agapē*-feast”.**

Open-hearted sharing was on the menu. This was not *just* a meal. **The meal was an occasion for talking about what was going on in one another’s lives. It was a time to “check in” with one another.** What are *you* learning? Where did *you* see God at work? How is *your* walk with Him? Are you dealing with areas of struggle? Do you have needs that we can lift up together in prayer, or help with? Are there people that God has drawn you to pray for? Are there things that you are especially grateful for today? Have you seen personal answers to prayer, or “God-sightings”?

Then there would be a teaching. We are to be devoted to the “doctrine of the apostles”. What did the apostles teach that might be helpful to us right now? Most of the time, this would be fairly brief.

The teaching would be followed by a time of open, interactive sharing. 1 Corinthians 14:26f says that “*each one* has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation.” Notice the emphasis on “each one”. **This is opening the floor up to any one of us who has something to share that would be edifying and helpful to others in the group.** It may be starting a song that leads us into a time of worship, ...or a brief teaching that God impressed upon someone that would be helpful or needful to share, ...or one of the revelatory gifts of the Spirit, ...or another Spirit-led act or demonstration of God’s love.

This may be a good time to clarify a bit regarding spiritual gifts. *Each of us in Christ has received one or more spiritual gifts that are the inworking of God's grace through us to benefit others in the Body.* Romans 12:3-6; 1 Corinthians 12:12-28; Ephesians 4:8,11-16; and 1 Peter 4:10,11 speak of these as “given” in a past tense. **They seem to be permanent, ongoing ways in which God works through us.** As we grow in Christ, and are willing to express what He is working within us, we will find ourselves discovering and doing those things He has empowered us to do. *BUT*, in 1 Corinthians 12:4-11, **Paul also describes a distribution of spiritual gifts that God gives at the time when we gather together.** These seem to be promptings and abilities that are given *for that time*, that may not be the “normal” promptings or giftings that we may have identified in the past. **We must always be open to respond to what God may desire to do in and with us now.** Also, Paul tells us to desire *the greater gifts*, especially that we may prophesy (14:1). God can do anything He wants, any time He wants. He may surprise you with something new.

So, after our *agapē*-feast, and a time of teaching, people in the Body may have a song, or a revelation, or something else to share. This is a time to stretch out and try new things. **We are learning to respond to the Spirit.** You may be led to start a song, ...or share a dream you had that may come to mind, ...or God may have revealed something for you to share with the group. Or, ...because there are varieties of *gifts, services, or inworkings* of God's Spirit (1 Cor. 12:4-7), the Lord may prompt you to serve someone in some way, ...or you may be led to speak out or pray zealously about healing or a mighty-act of God. Take the risk. **Give expression to what God is putting in your heart. Just be sure what you say will be *upbuilding*.** If you are called to confront something, a more private setting may be better. Our ministry is to “express-the-truth in love” to one another, as we are prompted by Jesus.

We are to be respectful of one another. We are to *take turns*, and *be silent* when it is not our turn.

Tongue speakers are only to be one person at a time, and only two or three in a meeting, ...and only when there is interpretation. If there is no interpretation, then no one else should speak in a tongue for the rest of that time. They are to *be silent*, ...though it is appropriate for such people to speak under their breath to themselves and to God.

If someone has received a **prophetic revelation**, they may speak it out, but if someone else receives a revelation while they are speaking, the first person is to sit down and *be silent*. There can be two or three prophets in a meeting, each one in turn.

People are not to be speaking in the background while others have the floor. They are to *be silent*, and wait until the meeting is over, if they have questions or need to talk with someone about something else. (Some people want to make vs. 34 a universal declaration that women should not speak in church. Clearly, that cannot be what Paul intended, for just a few chapters earlier, he allowed for women to pray or prophesy in the gathering [11:5]. This is *one illustration* of disruptive talking. The word for “speak”, here, is in a form describing ongoing talking. The word for “let them be silent” is the same as in vss. 28 and 30, regarding tongue speakers and prophets. Furthermore, we are all to “be being subject to one another” in our meetings (Eph. 5:21).

Why is this so important? This was the blueprint for meeting together to build each other up. It encourages our involvement. ***Being a disciple is meant to be a hands-on, experiential-kind of endeavor.*** For example, in vs. 31, Paul wrote, “Y’all are able to prophesy one by one, in order that *all might learn*, and all may be encouraged/exhorted.” The word for “learn” there is related to “disciple”. It refers to ***learning by inquiry, experimentation, practice.*** **We discover by *doing*.** How are you going to “learn” to prophesy, if you never speak up? **The *ekklēsia* is to be a learning laboratory, ...an experimentation and discovery time, where we try new things.** We are to grow all things into Jesus, who is our Head (which means “source” or “the One who brings us to completion”), and then, if we receive promptings, direction or messages from Him, we are to express those to one another in love. **When we do this, we receive grace from Jesus, and we pass that grace along to those we share it with.** ***The Body builds up the Body in love*** (Eph. 4:15,16). Interestingly, Paul closes out this chapter by encouraging us again to “desire earnestly to prophesy, and do not forbid to speak in tongues.”⁴⁰ But all things must be done properly and in an orderly manner” (1 Cor. 14:39,40).

Interactive Body-life causes us to stretch out to deepen and develop our sensitivity to Jesus, and it also helps us step out beyond our comfort zone to allow God to work through us in ways we may not be accustomed to. **Such meetings also deepen our relationships with, and appreciation for, one another.** Working through the stretching and expressing exercises of Body-life, draws us closer together. Sometimes, we rub off rough edges, too, ...but *that* is part of our purpose, as well. **We learn by risking together, making mistakes together, becoming more adept together.**

The fastest period of growth in church history was during the first three centuries, when God's people gathered together to be shaped and honed through interactive meetings. ***The acceptance and embrace of the Christian movement by the Roman Empire brought changes that “gutted” this kind of training, stretching, and experimentation.*** Large lecture halls were built, at government expense, for Christians to gather in, but **the interactive dynamic was lost.** Many curious non-believers came to see what this was all about, but what they found was formalism, liturgy, and one-way communication and direction from “up front” by a priest. **Even the *agapē*-feasts came to be de-emphasized, and eventually forbidden**, because of abuses. People were not pushed or trained to become Spirit-led disciples, and church growth crawled along, barely above population growth. **In times of revival, however, groups of believers would begin to meet again, and some of these dynamics have been rediscovered in their gatherings.**