

Notes for the Ekklēsia Meeting

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Jesus In The Midst

by Dan Trygg

“For where two or three have gathered together in My name, there I am in their midst.”

Matthew 18:20

This week, I received an email from my brother, Brian, in Illinois. As he was updating me on the events of recent days, he made an observation that I found great encouragement in. He moved down there in the summer of 1975, after graduating as a civil engineer from the University of Minnesota. It was his first job in his new career. He found a position with the Illinois Department of Transportation, a great opportunity for a new graduate. His office is located in a town along the eastern border of the state, a small, farming community. Before long, he informed us that he was going to be marrying one of the local women, and he has been there ever since. His wife's mom and stepdad attended a small Methodist country church. Brian has been a key part of that ministry from the beginning. In addition, he got involved with Gideons International. They are the organization that places Bibles in hospitals, jails, hotels, and distributes thousands of copies to service personnel and to college students.

Brian was telling me how the numbers in his church had dwindled over the years, as many of the old timers passed away. Their particular church went from having a half-time pastor to sharing a preacher with *five* other churches! The poor preacher had to go to six different country churches to preach, each weekend! It seemed almost inevitable that they would have to close their doors, before long. Brian noticed that **people had lost vision** (Prov. 29:18). When they tried to organize prayer meetings or study groups, they would fizzle after a brief time, and disband. As leaders puzzled over what was behind the lack of follow through, they began to hear repeated phrases, “Well, there were only four who said they could come, so we just canceled,” or, “We met a couple of times, but we could never get more than a few people to come out, so we gave up.” **People were discouraged, and they weren't expecting anything to happen.** Many of these people had come through a time when midweek Bible studies and prayer groups would be attended by many more people. Compared to their past experience, the small numbers of people willing to come out now seemed very paltry and almost not worth the effort. **This attitude of inertia and negativity was oppressive, almost crippling!** As he traveled the circuit of small country churches, he saw the same phenomenon repeated again and again. **People were unwilling to continue to meet if only a handful would come out.** Of course, one of the sad realities was that the total number of people in each church had declined so much that there were not all that many to draw from. The chances of getting a *large* group out for *any* activity was getting pretty unrealistic. **This defeatist, “it's not worth it” mindset was shutting the ministry possibilities down, before anything could get started.** It would be the *death* of these churches, if it continued.

To counter this situation, the Lord directed church leaders to the passage at the top of the page. **Had not Jesus said, “Where two or three have gathered together in My name, there I am in their midst”?** People were looking at this all wrong! They were looking at their meetings in terms of the number of *people* in attendance, and they were missing the whole point! Jesus *Himself* was there! **Why are we meeting, anyway?** Is it to be a pep rally? Is it to be a planning committee? Is it to be a Bible study? What are we trying to get energized and “pepped up” *about*, ...or what are we planning, or studying? To whom are we trying to pray? **Isn't all this activity supposed to be about Jesus? Isn't He why we gather** to do *any* of this stuff? In fact, the word used by Him for these gatherings was *ekklēsia*, “ones called-out to meet together”. **Who called this meeting, anyway? Who asked us to come together? Who invited you to come? Why am I here?** Is this strictly a *human* institution, with meetings simply contrived *by men*? Or, is *God Himself* behind the “calling together” process? **If the Lord is calling the meeting, then I don't want to miss it! It doesn't matter what anyone else does, I want to be doing what He asks of me.** Aside from my responsibility and desire to obey Him, *He Himself has promised to be there!*

My wife, Joan, works in a bookstore. They have author events, to help promote book sales. An author will come to town, spend a few hours at their bookstore, read selections from their books and possibly answer some questions, and generally sign some books. This is a big deal in the bookselling business! They will get dozens, scores of people to come out. Sometimes, they actually have to hand out numbers, and make people wait in line, to have a few moments with the author, while he or she signs their book. Do you think they would get these large numbers, if people found out that the author wasn't going to be there, after all? Do you think that the bookstore people would say, “Hey, it was so much fun to get together last month, let's schedule a gathering to meet again. This time, we won't have an author, or a book signing. We will just celebrate seeing other book lovers like us.” Do you think they would get many people to come out? OK, they may get a few, but the meeting would not have the same dynamics, focus, or

sense of purpose that an author signing has. I very much doubt that they could get people to come out, week after week, just to “see each other”. Without a sense of purpose, ...without the excitement of the “author visit”..., the attendance numbers of this gathering of author-groupies or book-o-philes, would probably fall off drastically, as well. BUT, what if you were a fan of a particular author, and you went to a reading and book-signing event, and discovered that there were *only three or four of you* who showed up! And, what if the author was personable, patient and willing to spend unhurried time with *each* of you who came out. Well, that could be one of the most memorable “author events” you would ever attend! Then, *the small numbers actually create a special environment where you can have more intimacy and interaction with the author.* Would you come again? Of course, the other reality of the smaller audience is that you may actually have to take part in the conversation! There may be awkward silences, or you may not know what to say. Sound familiar?

Obviously, this is meant to illustrate the important, often overlooked reality that **Jesus said He would be present whenever two or three of His people have gathered together into His name.** We need to look a little closer at what Jesus meant. To be “having been gathered into His name” is a deeper, more profound reality than meeting in a church building, or even somehow pronouncing His name over our meeting, or even asking His blessing upon our meeting. This is similar phraseology to what Jesus used as a condition for effectual prayer (Jn. 14:13,14; 15:16; 16:23,24,26). **To ask or act “in the name” of someone meant to act and speak according to the character and expressed authority of that person. In other words, you were coming as a representative of that other person, ...in their stead.** So to “ask in Jesus’ name” meant to ask what is in agreement with Jesus’ heart and character, or to ask what He has already told us He will give or has promised to do, or ask as if we were Jesus Himself coming to the Father. We can truly “ask in Jesus’ name” when we are one with Jesus in our heart and life. He said as much in John 15:7, “If ever you abide in Me, and My personal-instructions abide in you, ask whatever you desire and it will be done for you.” **What about meeting in Jesus’ name? To meet in Jesus’ name would seem to mean to come together at His initiative, gathering as His representatives, to speak and act in the meeting as though we were expressing His heart and conducting His business.** This is a much deeper responsibility than just coming to attend a religious service planned by a handful of other people. Again, this fits better with the word, *ekklēsia*. **The Greek word, *ekklēsia*, was generally used for people called out to meet for a purpose.** It was not just a social gathering, nor a religious gathering. There were different words for those kinds of events. **An *ekklēsia* happened when people were summoned, or “called out” of their homes and everyday responsibilities, to attend to some duty or responsibility.** It was often used of a caucus or political meeting, where they were to cast a vote or their participation was needed. **We are “called out” of our private, everyday lives to “gather into His name”.** Note that the preposition is different than when we were talking about prayer. There, if we asked “in His name” or in agreement with His heart, authority and will, it will be done for us. Here, we are called out to gather “into” His name. The Greek describes two or three who either “have *been* gathered (as by someone else) into His name” or, it may refer to two or three who “have chosen (for themselves) to gather themselves into His name”. The language seems to imply that the initiative may come as a summons from God, ...*or* from a felt need that motivates us to come into agreement with Him. **No matter how we come, when we come to that place of being united with Him in heart and purpose, He promises to be present with us.**

Note, too, the context of this promise, “Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven.” **It is in the context of spiritual authority, about making transactions together on earth that will affect the spiritual world,** that Jesus says, “for where two or three have gathered together *into My name*, I am *there* in their midst.” This goes far deeper than some feel-good experience of “feeling the Presence” of God. **We have real and serious business to attend to, if we can come together and get into Jesus’ name.** This would seem to tie into what Jesus said at the end of Matthew’s gospel, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me, ...and, behold, I am with you all the days, even to the end of the age” (28:18,20). **Jesus has all authority! If we can come together into His name, Jesus and even the smallest group we have will always be the majority power! We can get a lot accomplished when we are united with Him in His heart, authority and power!**

God gave the Illinois churches, “Where two or three have gathered together in My name, there I am in their midst.” When that old, defeatist, negative mindset would rise up, they began to answer back with this promise. I don’t know if they broke it down, like I did, but the promise of Jesus being there was enough to change the focus, and the motivation. People began to meet *anyway*, ...even when the numbers were small. They *kept* meeting, and were expecting that Jesus was, indeed, with them in what they were doing. God honored this renewed vision and faithfulness. Within a year’s time, their church has grown to where they can once again support a half-time pastor. Things are looking up, ...or maybe I should say, “*They* are looking up”..., and God *is* answering their prayers.