

Notes for the Ekklēsia Meeting

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How To Meet?

by Dan Trygg

“So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls. ⁴² They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴⁶ Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people.” Acts 2:41,42,46,47

“What is it 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

“But truthing in agape-love, we are to grow up all things into Him who is the Head (source, origin, the-one-who-brings-others-to-completion), Christ. Out-from Him, all the Body, being-tightly-assembled-together and being-tightly-knitted-together through every connecting-joint of the supply, according to the in-working in measure of each individual part, produces the growth of the Body toward the edification of itself in agape-love.” Ephesians 4:15,16

I was talking with a young man the other day. He was telling me that he and some of his friends had been reading the NT. They came to realize that **what most people in our culture call “church” is *nothing like what the Christians of the first century were doing.*** The experience of a first-century believer was *very* much different than what most Christians in our day expect. In fact, **for the first 300 years of church history, Christians grew and developed in a “church environment” that would have been virtually unrecognizable to many of us as being “church”.** Just for the sake of a bit of perspective, our country has not even been around for 300 years! 300 years is equivalent to about 12-15 generations ago. Can you imagine? **The first 12-15 generations of Christians never saw the inside of a church building.** They had no legally recognized church organizations. There were no church organizations that could hold property, so there was none. In fact, **a “church” would not have brought up the image of a religious building, at all.** The equivalent word, **the Greek word, *ekklēsia*, was commonly used for any “assembly” of people called together to meet.** The word was used more commonly for a political gathering. It had no religious connotation, at all. There was no “tax exempt status” for Christian groups, no church bank accounts. Everything was done *privately* and *informally*. **Instead of a “congregation” with a single leader, these were *informal gatherings in public places or private homes.*** Sometimes they met in privately rented rooms, or in the woods, or even in cemeteries, but usually meetings were held in someone’s home. *Leaders were “elders” who “oversaw” the people, as “shepherds” watched and cared for the sheep in their flock.* Elders were usually those who were older and more mature in the faith. There were usually *multiple elders* associated with these groups. (The Latin word for “shepherd” is “pastor”, and the Greek word for “overseer” is “episcopos”. The word, “bishop” came about as an informal *slurring* of the word “episcopos” in religious history. These were originally simply secular functional words for people who “kept an eye out for you”. They were *not* religious terms, or even terms for positions of power.) **During most of that three centuries, Christian gatherings were suspect or even *illegal.*** Most of the time, they were *tolerated*, but the danger of persecution was never far away. **This forced believers to keep their meetings even *more personal and informal.*** The church was where you invited those who were initiated, those who were serious. **It was *not* generally a place to bring outsiders.** These meetings were ***participatory and informal.*** They followed a *general* game plan or pattern, but they were *flexible* and *adaptable to the needs* of those who came. *I think the church gatherings of those first 300 years were more like AA support groups of our day than what “churches” have become in our culture.*

How did they meet? What happened at the typical NT church meeting? From the passage in Acts 2, we see that *they met wherever they could.* Sometimes they met in the back porch of the Temple courts, the portico of Solomon. This was a short-term, temporary opportunity that they took advantage of. **Soon, however, they could no longer meet in public,** due to persecution from the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem. Aside from other temporary public meetings, ***the normative “church gathering” was an informal group meeting in a home.*** This continued for 300 years, until the Roman emperor, Constantine, legalized Christianity and began promoting it. He began to build lecture halls, and within a few years the face, and dynamics, of the church had dramatically changed. Instead of being interactive, informal meetings, the *new* church became large congregations, where people had to be quiet in order to hear. Questions and interaction were discouraged, and the meetings became more formal and ritualistic. There was no opportunity for the average person to participate, anymore. (Interestingly, the growth of the church increased by double digits during the *first* three centuries, but growth fell off to only 2% per year under the changes introduced by Constantine!)

By contrast, we see from the I Corinthians 14 passage that **the expectation of the NT church was that everyone came with *something to share.*** They usually met in the evening, after a long day of work. ***They came with***

a song to sing, either one that had been ministering to them during the week, or one that God was impressing on them to share in that meeting. **Or, they had some doctrinal or inspirational message to share** from their experiences, or again something God was telling them to share for the group. **Some may have received a dream or vision**, and were led to share that, while **others had a prophetic message to share with someone, or with the entire group. Still others shared a message in a tongue.** If there was no interpretation, however, this person would quiet down, and speak only to himself and God. Without an interpretation, the tongue could not benefit others, so it was inappropriate to continue to speak out what others cannot understand. **No one was to dominate the meeting. There was to be an orderly taking of turns**, respectfully listening to people as they speak out what God had worked in them, or impressed on them to share. Note, too, that there is a place to “let the others pass judgment” (vs. 29). This means that **not everything in these meetings was infallibly “God inspired” or “God ordained”.** There were also expressions of human immaturity, mistakes and misperception, as well. **It was more important for people to learn to express their thoughts and their faith, even at the risk of error or immaturity, than to be silent.** The informal home church was a safe place to take risks, to ask questions, to learn by doing and to develop by trial and error.

Somehow the meeting was to cover four basic areas, delineated in Acts 2. There was to be **(1.) apostolic teaching; (2.) sharing** among the members, **(3.) taking a meal together**, often incorporating the Lord’s supper at the end of the meal; **and (4.) praying together**, including both joint prayer, and/or ministering to one another in Spirit-led prayer ministry to one another. The fact that we are only given general instructions means that **these were guidelines, not some ritualistic formula.** We must be open for the Spirit to lead us in ways we had not planned or expected. Taking a closer look, **learning the apostolic doctrine was schooling new believers into the content of what it means to follow Christ.** It covers who He is, why He came, what He did, and then, what that means for you. It also passes along the charge, “teaching them to do *all* that I commanded” (Matt. 28:20). This instructs the new believers regarding Christ’s expectation regarding their manner of living, His expectations of commitment and obedience, and the vision and charge He gave to reach out to those around them, and even to bring the message to the limits of the earth. **Secondly, the sharing was more than just small talk. It was about opening one’s heart to other believers in the fellowship, for the purpose of support, instruction, encouragement and practical ministry.** In Acts 2:46, the phrase “with sincerity of heart” has been poorly translated. It literally means that their hearts were easily accessible to one another. **This was part of the purpose for the third ingredient, taking food together. Somehow, sharing a snack or meal with one another allows us to relax and open up more easily to one another.** It facilitates the level of comfort and sharing that can result. In the first centuries of the church, these were actual meals that were shared together, usually ending with the Lord’s supper. The elements of bread and wine were from the staple foods eaten at the meal, a reminder of the Lord’s death and return in even the simplest ingredients of everyday life. *He is our life.* Just as we need to eat physical food for our bodies, we need to receive Him as life to our inner beings. Moreover, as we partake of the one shared loaf, and the wine that is shared, we are reminded of the oneness of our brotherhood, the life from Him that is within each of us which makes us one. **Finally, the prayers bring our focus back to God as our Source, our Hope, our Savior, Healer, Helper and Friend.** We join together, bringing our needs to Him in prayer, and ministering one to another, as we are prompted to do by the Holy Spirit.

As we read Ephesians 4, we discover that Paul expands on this even more. He emphasizes that **the church builds up the church.** This is the stated purpose of our meeting together in I Corinthians 14:26, “Let all things be done for edification”, or “building up”. Paul says **“each one” is to come with something to share**, a song, a teaching, a revelation, message or lesson from God, a Spirit-prompted word or saying, etc. The description of church in I Corinthians 12-14 is exactly the same as in Ephesians 4, or Romans 12, Colossians 3, or I Peter 4. In each of these passages, *we are all encouraged to share with one another the things God enables us to offer to one another to bless, strengthen, teach, admonish or encourage each other.* **This interaction of the individuals of the Body of Christ with each other is the core purpose for our meeting together.** We are to help one another grow up all things into Jesus, and then, as He directs or prompts us, *we are to serve one another by expressing God’s truth to one another in love.* As we do this, *we build one another up, and the Body of Christ is built up.* **This interactive dynamic of the church described in Acts 2, and these other passages, is reinforced by the 21 “one-another” responsibilities we are to exercise toward one another.** There are 21 things we are to do with and for one another when we meet. All of them are about strengthening or building up one another. The point is that **the description of the NT indicates that God intended church meetings to be very interactive and expressive among all who come together.**

How do we meet? *We need to mentally step away from the formalism and programmatic expectations we have of “church”, and allow God to teach us afresh how to come together as family members in Him.* **As we share what we are learning in Christ, and learn to help one another, the Church will rediscover God’s plan for His people.**