

Notes for the Ekklēsia Meeting

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The Dysfunctional Dynamics of Christendom

by Dan Trygg

“...to the preparing of the saints unto work of service, to build up the Body of Christ.”

Ephesians 4:12

...truthing in love, we are to grow up all things into Him, who is the head, Christ, ¹⁶ out-from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by that which every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, makes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.”

Ephesians 4:15-16

“As each one received a gift, be-serving it unto yourselves, as good stewards of God’s grace.”

I Peter 4:10

“...beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.’ ¹² Then they understood that He did not say to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”

Matthew 16:11-12

“A little leaven leavens the whole lump.”

Galatians 5:9

There is a significant difference between the Jesus movement that began at Pentecost, and the historic visible expressions of it known as Christendom. *The Jesus movement* is the life-transforming, expansive growth of the Kingdom of God in those who receive and actively follow Jesus. *Christendom* is the outward, visible religious expressions and trappings of the faith community. **The Jesus movement is the activation of God’s people into pursuit of Him and His ways.** Often it is working behind the scenes, in personal lives, in relationships or informal small groups. **Christendom is the outward shell of people of faith, and their religious institutions.** Ideally, Christendom should be an accurate expression of the influence of Jesus in the lives of His people. In practice, however, Christendom has often diverted from the real life of the Spirit. Often, it is a memorial expression of a past revival, or it is the organizational institution that has tried to preserve, control and expand the work of the church in different settings. **Sadly, the dynamics of Christendom are often very different from those of the true Jesus movement.** The dynamics of Christendom are often repressive and controlling. There is a top-down authority structure that tends to keep people immature. **Instead of activating people into action, most of them remain spectators.** While the Holy Spirit keeps “pushing people up”, Christendom tends to “keep them down”. *The dynamics of Christendom usually drift into dysfunction and codependency.*

If you look at the first three passages above, you will notice that the emphasis of each is that **we all are to be an active part of the Body of Christ. Each one is to be prepared for service, and given the opportunity and encouragement to share their unique God-prompted abilities with others in the Body.** The “saints” (i.e., *all* of us in Christ) are to do the work of service that builds up the Body of Christ. In Eph. 4:15,16, *we* are charged to grow all things up into Christ (making Him Lord over *every* part of our lives, and learning to listen to Him). Then, when we meet together, **we are to speak and express the truth of Jesus to one another, so that each of us actively participates to encourage others to grow and mature.** As we do this, the entire Body benefits, and experiences growth in every way. Note that **we are all charged to grow all things into Christ, and to be active in ministry.** This is reinforced by the comment from I Peter. Peter exhorts us to employ our gifts we have received from God to serve one another. We have a responsibility to do so. Peter uses the word picture of a steward to drive this point home. A steward was entrusted with a task or duty by his or her master. He was obligated to perform this task according to the master’s instructions. The apostle Paul wrote, “Moreover, it is desired in stewards that they be found faithful” (I Cor. 4:2). **Each one has received a special spiritual gift. We are responsible to utilize it to minister to one another.**

The NT teaches that the Body of Christ is to be a healthy, interactive, interdependent relationship system. Paul likens us to a physical body. Each of us is like a different part of the body, each with its own unique design and function. *Individually*, we could not survive or prosper (What chance would a hand or a stomach have to survive, if it were excised from its body?), but *together* we can meet one another’s needs by doing what *we* do best. When we do this, we all prosper and are healthy. **If some of our parts are not functioning properly, it doesn’t take long for us to feel this. Soon, the entire body is affected by the poor performance of even one part.** Sociologists and psychologists recognize that families, and virtually every other interactive relationship system, have dynamics like this. Everyone has a part to play in the family. There are jobs and responsibilities for all. In order for the family to run smoothly, and **for everyone to have their needs met, each person must pull their own weight by doing the jobs assigned to them.** In a healthy family, **if someone misses their job, other members will call them to account, and get them back on task. If they are injured or unable to fulfill their responsibility (non-functioning), other members will have to compensate by over-functioning (doing their role, as well as that of the non-functioning person).** As soon as the under-functioning person is able, they get back to their tasks, and the other people are relieved of their extra work load. **This is what healthy looks like, both in a balanced, functioning system, and a temporarily non-functioning system.**

Whenever there is a *breakdown*, *others compensate to pick up the slack*, so the family can go on, ...or the *breakdown will begin to pile up and back up, and everyone is affected* (e.g., if the clothes washer quits doing laundry, other people do it, or the laundry piles up, and eventually everyone runs out of laundry.) *A healthy system quickly returns to balance.*

Dysfunction is when a relationship system is permanently out of balance, and the imbalance is accepted as normal. It can happen in two ways: (1.) A perpetually under-functioning person is never called to account and put back to work. The under-functioning person is *dependent* on the others in the system, because they continue to offer him help and services, but he is lazy, immature and/or irresponsible. As long as others continue to overcompensate, they *enable* this person to continue in their irresponsible behavior. These perpetual over-compensators are *co-dependent*, because they *cooperate* in the ongoing non-functioning of the dependent person. And, (2.) **A perpetually over-functioning, controlling person or persons keep other people in the relationship system from maturing and taking their rightful roles and responsibilities.** In this scenario, the over-functioning individuals feel entitled to greater levels of power and control than those who are kept less mature. While it may look as though the immature are the problem, it could be that they do not even know that things should be different. This arrangement is what they have come to know and expect as normal, even though it is terribly unhealthy and not very effective. They are *enabled to remain immature* by those who over-function, ...and they *enable* the controllers to continue to have greater influence and control, by continuing to accept lesser responsibility. **The prefix “dys-“ means “bad, unhealthy, with-difficulty”. Dysfunction, then, means that the relationship system is functioning, but not effectively.** There are unhealthy dynamics that hurt the members, and keep them stuck. Again, **people in such a system often do not realize this, because this is what they were first introduced to, or grew up with. They are codependent. They don’t know it could be different. They don’t know what healthy would look like.**

As I said above, Christendom, the outward shell and religious institutions of the people of faith, tends to drift toward dysfunction and codependency. When you ponder the description of Body-life found in the NT, and compare it with most churches, you will find that **most churches do not have the kind of healthy, interactive dynamics the Bible describes.** In fact, church experiences are *nothing like* those described in the NT. **We (most of us) have been introduced to a religious community, and a way of doing things, that is patently dysfunctional and unhealthy.** There are some people, generally a very small number, who do most of the “ministry activities”, and the vast majority are simply passive listeners and spectators. Furthermore, there is not even a time set aside for interactive sharing, or learning to minister to others. Most people do not ever develop a consistent, personal walk with God that transforms their lives. They never learn to be led by the Spirit, or get involved in serving, or in building up and encouraging others. In fact, **most people hardly ever talk to anyone at church at a meaningful level, at all!** We file in, and we file out. We sit shoulder to shoulder, and look at the back of the head of the person in front of us. Whatever greetings we may exchange generally are very surface interactions. **Do you know there are over 21 interactive responsibilities God gave to us, ...21 “one another” commands? Most of us don’t even know what they are, much less practice them!** No wonder the church is so anemic, and churchgoers’ lives look little different than those who are outsiders! *Dysfunction! Codependency!* We think this is *normal*, ...how it *should* be, but it is not at all what God had in mind for His people. It may be *what we were taught*, or *how we were brought up*, but it is *not* God’s plan.

We can easily trace back the introduction of this dysfunctional system, and its practices, in Western church history. It began when the Roman Emperor, Constantine, declared that he was a Christian, and began to promote the church. Before his time, **the Jesus movement was an underground network of informal home meetings, scattered throughout the Empire.** These meetings had spread from Judea, all around the Roman Empire, so that there was hardly a city, town or neighborhood that was not infiltrated by “Jesus people”. **These meetings were informal, interactive, and highly participatory.** People were not only taught theology, they shared personal struggles, and were actively helping one another to follow Christ. **Each one eventually learned “how to meet”, and could start their own group, if needed. When Constantine came in, all this changed.** Meetings were held in special buildings, lecture halls. Meetings were large. It was difficult to get to know everyone there. In these meetings, there was teaching, but people had to be quiet, so the speaker could be heard. Questions were discouraged. Because these meetings were public, people tended to “dress up”, and things became more formal. People were attending who weren’t even serious about following Jesus. People became *spectators*, not participants. The trappings and unhealthy dynamics of Christendom are over 1700 years old! **The Jesus movement continues to bubble up and move forward in individual lives and in small group movements. The codependent mindset, however, usually quickly hobbles, hampers and eventually swallows up most of these spontaneous movements.**

Jesus warned against the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees. They were masters of dysfunction, and were the over-functioning overlords of their religious system. **Their teaching was like leaven**, permeating all it touches. **We must beware of the dysfunctional leaven of Christendom, and insist on health and maturity in Jesus.**