

Notes for the Ekklēsia Meeting

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Rudimentary Principles of Worldly Religion

by Dan Trygg

“When we were minors, we had also been enslaved to the rudiments (of religious training) of the world-system. ⁴ But when the fulfillment of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵ to redeem those under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. ⁶ And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba, Daddy!’ ⁷ So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God. ⁸ But in the past, when you didn’t know God, you were enslaved to things that by nature are not gods. ⁹ But now, since you know God, or rather have become known by God, how can you turn back again to the powerless and bankrupt rudimentary principles and activities? Do you want to be enslaved to them all over again?”

Galatians 4:3-9

Did you ever hear of a muscle car that “purred like a kitten”? I tend to drive older, “junkier” cars. Most of them are neither quiet, nor particularly efficient. On occasion, however, I have had the privilege to get behind the wheel of a finely-tuned, efficient, quiet automobile, ...so quiet, that I wasn’t quite sure it was running! Step on the gas, and the car instantly responds with power and grace. But, if you were to take any one of these “purring kittens”, and remove a spark plug wire or two, it would begin to sputter, lurch, vibrate and lose both its power and efficiency. Can you imagine if you could even keep it running on *one* cylinder, how noisy and ineffective it would be? It would be chugging, burping, maybe even backfiring! Its power and efficiency depend on the proper working of each individual part, coordinated together in a properly timed, interactive fashion. *The “power of the purr” depends upon the full participation of the parts.*

The early church was a culture that was highly interactive. They met in small, informal home groups. There was some apostolic teaching, in an atmosphere where *questions* and *discussion* were expected and *encouraged*. There was *personal sharing* of victories, struggles and concerns, along with *constructive encouragement and feedback* from others. Some of this took place around a dinner table. This meal was not some hurried event, but a leisurely *fellowship meal*, recognizing and celebrating the presence of Jesus in their midst, and their oneness in Him. There was more time for talking and sharing over the meal. Towards the end of the meal, someone would take bread, give thanks for Jesus’ willingness to die on their behalf, then they would each one serve this loaf to another, taking a piece to eat it in remembrance of Christ’s body, broken for them. Having done that together, someone would pass the wine, and they would all take some of it as a reminder of His blood poured out for them. They would joyfully *remember the new covenant* He purchased, so that each one could have access to the Father, and each one could be filled and led by the Holy Spirit. Afterwards (as well as along the way, as the Spirit may lead), *time was set apart for prayer ministry with and for one another. Everyone was involved, both as a giver, a sharer, and as a recipient.* Close bonds of friendship and appreciation were formed and cemented in these interactive meetings. **People learned to express themselves to support and encourage others. Every member became a minister to others.** Everyone joined in prayer, words and actions that built up other people. They learned not only to listen and learn, but also to speak, serve and convey love to one another. **When each part was participating, the power and grace of God was present, and the entire group was blessed and filled with praise and joy in His working** (Acts 2:42-47; Eph. 4:15,16). ***The power and presence of God was experienced in the full interactive participation of the people.***

Does all of this sound kind of strange? Does it sound very *unlike* what you experience when you “go to church” today? Well, it was very different than any religious system or group of the first century, too! **In fact, the Christian movement was the first fully-participatory religious group in history.** This is because of the new covenant Jesus established. Before that, unresolved human sin kept us at a distance from God. **Sin had made a separation between us and the Holy God** (Isa. 59:2). **In people’s attempts to reach out toward God** (or, the gods of paganism), **they felt this distance.** They appealed to Him and attempted to approach Him by substitutionary sacrifices. They set apart certain places as “holy”, and designated special implements as “sacred”. They consecrated certain people to become “priests” to seek this God and offer sacrifices, prayers and to worship of their behalf. Remember, when God spoke to Israel from Mount Sinai? **The people wanted Moses to be their mediator, because they were afraid of God.** That has been a common practice in most religions. Certain people are set apart to seek God on behalf of the rest of the people. These “holy people” are thought to have more influence with God, and more power from God, than other individuals. **The OT tabernacle, temple, sacrifices, priests, cleansing rituals all were meant to emphasize our distance from this holy God, while at the same time they were word pictures to prepare for God’s great solution to this problem, through Jesus Christ.**

Jesus came to *erase* all those barriers and divisions. He came to *remove every obstacle*, so that *all of God's people would have open and unhindered access to Him*. He was the better, perfect sacrifice to remove sin, once and for all. He is the great high priest, and He has opened the way, once and for all, so that we can come freely into God's presence through Him (Heb. 7-10). **There is no longer any need for special holy sacrifices, holy rituals, holy mediators, or holy buildings in order for us to approach God. All has been fulfilled in Christ**, and in fact **He has made all of us to be holy people, built into a holy dwelling of God in the Spirit, called with a holy calling**. Every last one of us in Christ are called to declare the excellencies of His greatness, and to display and express His indwelling life to the world around us (I Pet. 2:9; II Cor. 4:6,7).

The interactive home fellowships were the backbone of the explosively growing Christian movement. In these incubators of growth, love and maturity, wonderful things happened. **God worked powerfully; people changed dramatically; and the message went forth speedily to win others**. In the face of ridicule, expulsion, opposition, persecution and even death, Christians operating in groups like these developed strong, overcoming persistent faith.

One of the pervasive assaults on the Christian movement was the *religious sensibilities of pagan culture creeping into the church*. People had grown up with such sensibilities. It seemed almost *too* bold, ...almost wrong and disrespectful..., to think that *I* could have a personal relationship with the living God of the universe. **Religious trappings, rituals, and dynamics kept appearing in Christian gatherings, and had to be confronted by those who understood liberty in Christ**. Otherwise, certain "*religious experts*" would assert themselves as intermediaries. They would, in effect, "*shut out*" others from approaching God directly. Or, they insisted that people *have certain qualifications* before they could speak up in the meeting. They treated others as "children", incapable of effectively participating in the meeting because of lack of education, or social skills. **These were presented as reasonable controls to "prevent false doctrine" or "religious extremism" from gaining too much influence**. (In reality, these problems usually worked themselves out in a relatively short span of time, when they did appear. The Holy Spirit was well capable of informing His people that something was amiss, and exposing the problem.) Instead of trusting the interactive, Spirit-led dynamic God introduced, these **religious people asserted control measures to "protect the church"**. **Sadly, these "religionists" were more dangerous than the issues they were concerned about**. They brought the liberated, Spirit-led people of God back under religious bondage.

Again, this "religious spirit" had surfaced from time to time, and place to place, throughout the first three centuries of church history. The healthy, interactive dynamic of the church would eventually expose the error, and it would be addressed. In the 4th century, however, **the Roman Emperor, Constantine, took an interest in Christianity**. He introduced changes that rapidly undercut the interactive nature of the church, and it was quickly overrun by unhealthy religious dynamics and trappings. *First, he built large lecture halls* as meeting places for the church. Instead of intimate, interactive home groups, *the dynamics changed to one-way communication* from the teachers to the people. Common people could no longer participate. *Secondly, the "love feasts" or fellowship meals were replaced by "the Eucharist"*. This was no longer a *meal*, but a *ritual* where bread and wine were offered once again as a sacrifice of Jesus' body and blood to temporarily appease the wrath of God. The bread and wine were now distributed by "priests" who were especially consecrated and set apart from "common people". They alone could bless and distribute the elements for communion. In fact, the "love feast" was declared an illegal activity. *Constantine reinforced the exaltation of bishops and priests from common people* by giving them special privileges and recognition. *He also promoted religious places, artwork, sacred objects, shrines, incense, religious dress for "clergy"*. Most of these were carried directly over from pagan cultic worship, and given new meanings within the church. **The average believer was virtually totally removed from any participation in the meeting**. Even congregational singing was banned, and replaced by official choral music. There was also a misogynistic movement in the 4th century that removed women from leadership in the church, suppressed and virtually silenced them for centuries. **Instead of the freedom and confidence of those first-century believers, who had known and understood the new covenant, the people of God were once again drawn into bondage to a religious system that shut them out and held them captive**.

God has worked in history to call His people *out of oppressive religious systems, and He desires for us to reclaim our birthright as His children*. The Reformers liberated people to see that they can come to God directly for salvation, and they can read the Word of God for themselves. The Reformation they began, however, fell short, when it came to the practical realities of "church life". So many of the dynamics are *still* shutting God's people out, and holding them captive to age-old religious conventions. **The church is not a place; it is the interactive gathering of God's people, called out for His purposes**. He who has ears, let him hear the call of the Spirit to find like-minded people with whom to speak the truth in love. Do not be constrained by rudiments of worldly religion. Rather, **join the interactive community of saints, the every-member ministry pulsating with the power and presence of God**.