

Notes for the Ekklēsia Meeting

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Everybody, Bring a Dish!

by Dan Trygg

“What is the outcome then, brothers and sisters? When you assemble, each one has a song of praise, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification.” I Corinthians 14:26

“Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. ² And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect. ³ For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith. ⁴ For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, ⁵ so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. ⁶ Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly.” Romans 12:1-6

The apostle Paul describes a pattern for meeting together as a church that is dramatically different from what most established churches around the world today do. Most believers come together expecting to *be taught*, or at least *be led* by someone else, during the meeting. Paul is suggesting exactly the *opposite* here. He is suggesting that **when we come together that we should come together as active participants. Each one should come with some component to add to the recipe for their meeting that day, ...like a spiritual pot-luck supper! The more, the better!** *Everyone* comes as a priest, as an *active functionary for God* to the people. **The goal of the meeting is to “build up”, ...to equip and encourage one another, as individuals, ...as well as to assemble and strengthen the parts into a corporate, interactive whole.** This cannot happen unless *all* are given an opportunity to express their gifts, and to reach out to one another in real, meaningful ways. **A Body cannot become an interactive organism, such as the apostle described in I Corinthians 12-14 and Ephesians 4:15,16, unless the members act in relation to one another.**

The NT model for meeting is *horizontally focused*, i.e., believers met primarily to encourage and interact *with one another*. Often the emphasis in modern church services is *vertical*, i.e., we are there to “serve God” with our praise, worship and giving, ...but interaction with one another is noticeably *absent*. The NT horizontal emphasis reflects the task Jesus laid upon the apostles, which was foremost in their minds: to “make disciples” (Matt. 28:18-20). **God desires more that we would take seriously His priority of developing people when we meet.** We can talk with God and worship Him throughout every day, but we have only limited times when we can meet *together*. In a very poignant moment in Biblical history, the prophet declared to a disobedient king that God desired *obedience*, not *sacrifice* (I Sam. 15:1-22). Like King Saul, **we have made a great show of our devotion to God in certain externals, but we have not carried out the primary mission He has given us to accomplish.** What good are our sacrifices, or our praises, if we avoid the express command of our heavenly King? *He wants us to help one another* incorporate faith into daily life.

What is it that God *wants* from the church? Mature, obedient followers of Jesus Christ. **He wants us to develop our spiritual muscle, our gifts and abilities. He wants us to learn to be discerning.** The way we typically do church allows us to remain *babes*, ...spoon-fed and leader-led. Our diet consists of pre-digested slurry fit for infants. No matter how insightful the teacher may be, solid food comes only to those who “by reason of *use* have trained *their* faculties to discern good and evil” (Heb. 5:14). **Maturity comes not from eating, alone. Maturity comes from doing,** ...from self-discipline, exercise, application and experimentation, ...from taking on additional responsibilities, ...from stepping out into adult-like behaviors. **God wants an army of soldiers, a nation of responsible, discerning adults, not a mass of infants overseen by spiritual babysitters.** He wants us to do more than merely *talk* and *sing* about how wonderful He is, ...He wants us to *take responsibility* for our spiritual walk, *grow to maturity* by applying what we learn, and *participate* in serving others! **In our meetings, we are to be equipped for service.** We are to “be ministered to”, as well as “become ministers to”. **We are to learn how to care for and help one another grow and develop** (Eph. 4:12-16).

By embracing a formula for church that relies heavily on the output of a few, and allows the vast majority to be spectators, we have unwittingly *undermined the entire Kingdom enterprise*. We have encouraged laziness, feelings of inadequacy, fear, softness, naiveté, and self-centeredness. Instead, **we should be rearing responsible, industrious, confident, fearless, tough, savvy, and service-oriented people, ...men and women who take initiative and ownership in the King’s business, ...ones who press in to see what God wants for them to do, and will problem-solve, adapt and persevere until it is accomplished.**

Growing up spiritually is about learning and sharpening new skills. In the practical section of Paul’s letter to the Romans, he emphasizes that first **we need to dedicate ourselves to the Kingdom mission! We do this by presenting our bodies as living sacrifices, ...available to Him, at any time, for any reason (Rom. 12:1)...**, and **then by working hard**

to transform our thinking and perception. The purpose for this renewal of the mind is to discover *by experimentation and growing discernment* what the will of God is (Rom. 12:2). This is not some mystical, “What does God want me to do with my life?” kind of quest. No. **We are to discover how to find our place of service in the Body of Christ, and learn to function effectively** (Rom. 12:3-8). *What do we bring to the table, ...and how do we bring it?*

It should not surprise us to find that the Christian gathering was to be more of a learning laboratory than a classroom. It is meant to follow a more *participatory, “hands-on” approach*, like industrial arts and home economics, than a strictly academic, “in your head”, style of learning. **Mastery comes by doing, not by mere thinking or imagining. Without the benefit of actually doing it, we cannot truly be prepared for the real thing.** Imagination can only take us so far. For example, no one can really be taught to swim without actually getting in the water. Theory, videos or dry-land exercises do not fully equip a person to successfully and skillfully swim. The feel of the water, the effect of buoyancy, resistance, and fluid mechanics, must be *felt and adapted to* in actual, real-life practice. In a similar way, classroom driver's training cannot take the place of real driving time in a car. I don't know about you, but I *certainly* do not want a doctor operating on *my* body, who has never actually *worked with* a scalpel before!

So, what skills are we supposed to be learning when we come to church? They fall into two categories: (1.) People-serving skills; and (2.) Spirit-response skills. It is obvious that we are to learn to interact, share-with, and serve one another in ways that are honest and supportive (Eph. 4:15,16). The skills we can learn in relation to one another will not only develop and stretch us as individuals, they will equip us for our larger mission to the world around us. **Our people-serving skills train us to listen attentively, to develop a “bedside manner”, to learn to reach out in caring ways, etc. The Spirit-response skills are about learning to discover how the Holy Spirit leads us.** By learning to recognize and act upon the inner promptings we may feel, we move beyond the “world of imagination” to experience what happens when we “get behind the wheel”, or “slip into the water”. **We learn to discern, interpret and respond to God's nudgings in our lives.** Through practice, we also strengthen our ability to *effectively express* those leadings, as we evaluate our halting, clumsy, first attempts and are able to incorporate any insights gained into our “tool bag” for future opportunities. **If God is, indeed, desiring to move us toward maturity, we can expect that He will be prompting us to step out in these areas.** He will “show up” to give us practice, because He wants to develop us. **By taking risks in a supportive, interactive environment, we begin to discern and develop our ability to detect His leading. We can get pointers from one another's experiences and example.** We need to be able to ask, “How does God work in *your* life?”

The discussion in I Corinthians 12 about the various spiritual gifts, and how each has a different and valuable function, clearly underlies 14:26. The placement of “the love chapter” between two chapters dealing with spiritual gifts in Body life, *anchors* its message and application *solidly* into **the main themes that Paul has been addressing throughout, namely, “be considerate of others”, and “don't insist on your own way, but make room for the needs and gifts of others”.** The discussion of the first half of chapter 14, concerning the use of tongues versus prophecy, focuses *even more* on evaluating what *we* do in light of whether or not it would benefit *others*. *Building up or edifying others is more important than my personal pleasure or enjoyment.* **“Building up the Body” also means more than individual encouragement and strengthening. It means establishing stronger relationship ties in the group. This is why it is important to consider the feelings of others, ...to not offend, and work hard to include others as “part of the family”.** Paul is attempting to guide the Corinthians in healthy, productive interaction when they meet.

What are some practical “pointers” or “rules of thumb” that may help us? (1.) Come with something to share. Give it some *forethought*, and come prepared with something that could benefit others. **(2.) Be personal,** share your own *contemporary experiences*, your struggles, your new discoveries, your concerns, your “God-sightings”, your answers to prayer. Do not misuse sharing time as an opportunity to speak sideways about “other peoples' issues”. Keep your sharing about *you*, or about *something God revealed to you* that might benefit the group. **(3.) Listen to and respect one another.** God gave us two ears, and one mouth. Use them accordingly. Be attentive, not disruptive. **(4.) Take turns,** don't “hog” the time. Give others a chance. You don't have to “drop the whole load”, right there, right then! **(5.) Listen to understand.** When someone shares, and appears to want counsel, support or help, be certain you correctly understand their concern. **You won't provide a good solution, if you misdiagnose the problem.** **(6.) Be sensitive, ask for permission to share with someone, or minister to them. Respect their boundaries,** their feelings, their comfort level. Keep it brief. Public things are for the public. Private things are for in private. **(7.) Win the right to be heard.** If people are *not* trusting you, don't press them. Show them that you are worthy of trust, ...that you will treat them well. If you love and respect them, they are likely to come back; if you abuse them, they probably won't. (“Abuse” is simply “inappropriate or wrongful use”.) **(8.) Be prayerful.** Ask God for His heart and His direction for His precious loved one. **(9.) Whatever you say or do, be certain it is in love.** This is not a time for debate, or spiritual sparring. Nor is this a time for talking about *your* pet interests or concerns. This is a time to act and speak in love, to build up the *other* person. **(10.) Be watchful with thanksgiving.** Rehearse what was accomplished and thank God for all He has done. Don't forget to celebrate special contributions each person made to make the time special, ...a *feast* of spiritual blessing!