

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

Info: (651) 283-0568 Discipleship Training Ministries, Inc. www.dtminc.org Today's Date: January 10, 2021

Function and Dysfunction in Church History

by Dan Trygg

“And they devoted themselves to the apostles' doctrine, to sharing, to the breaking of bread, and to prayers.” Acts 2:42

“But truthing in love, let us grow in every way into Him who is the head-- Christ. ¹⁶ From Him the whole body, fitted and knit together by every supporting ligament, promotes the growth of the body for building up itself in love by the proper working of each individual part.” Ephesians 4:15,16

Jesus chose to use a word to differentiate the movement He was initiating from the established religious norms of His day and His culture. He had no intention of trying to reform the synagogue system, or the temple practices. He was going to do something far more radical. He was going to unleash a movement of people that would prove to be unstoppable, even though the powers of hell and of men would be set against it. He told His disciples that “the gates of Hades will not be strong against the *ekklēsia*, the “ones-called-out-to-meet-together-for-a-purpose”. While “synagogue” was a religious term, *ekklēsia* was not. It was a generic, undefined term for an assembly of people called-out to meet together to conduct business, ...in this case, *Jesus' business*.

It is important to see that the apostles understood that what Jesus meant was to establish small, interactive groups, meeting in homes. When the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost, the new believers in Jesus were baptized into His name, and began meeting together. They were “called out to meet for a purpose”, and the purpose was to deepen and develop their faith in two ways: They met together to deepen their understanding and equip them in their relationships to God, and they also met to deepen their relationships with one another. Acts 2:42 is a summary verse, but verses 44-47 gives us a more specific breakdown. It is significant that these verses have the same phrase strategically placed in the first and last verse of this passage. Literally, verse 44 begins with “But all the ones believing were being upon the same-thing...”, and verse 47 ends with, “But the Lord added the ones being saved daily upon the same-thing.” These phrases aren't even translated in most versions, but they are strategically placed to “bookend” the dynamic of early meetings of believers. I believe this phrase, “upon the same-thing” is meant to describe the discipleship dynamic that early Christians were directed to participate in. These activities were consistently promoted as the follow-up for the new believers in Jerusalem, and *these practices describe what we know of early church meetings throughout the first century, wherever the gospel was preached and accepted*.

The thing that really stands out is *the interactive nature of these meetings*. People were encouraged to share. The environment was designed to be conducive to such sharing. After a time of teaching, there was a meal. It began with the blessing and sharing of bread and wine, in remembrance of Jesus' death. They ate the loaf of bread together, and drank of the wine together. It was a covenant meal with God, as well as with each other. During the meal people relaxed and opened up with each other. They shared their concerns and needs with one another. At the end of the meal, there was a time of prayers and ministering to one another. During this time, people ministered as the Spirit prompted them. Often, practical or financial help was offered or provided as a result of the needs that became known in the sharing. As we see from 1 Corinthians 14:26, everyone was encouraged and expected to participate. This was part of the discipleship process, learning to share a message, use a gift, sing a worship song, or pray for others. Because of the informal, interactive, participatory nature of these meals, everyone and anyone would understand how to organize and run such a meeting. In the early days of the Christian movement, they were encouraged to start such meetings, whenever the opportunity may present itself. The informal, interactive, grassroots nature of such meetings also meant that they were, in fact, easily reproducible. It also meant that the movement was like leaven, spreading out in every direction. There was no hierarchical bottleneck of control. Leaders were seen as resources of strength and experience who were available to offer support and encouragement, and, sometimes to correct error. They were looked to because were credible. Good leaders were training and sending out others to lead.

We see the same strategy and dynamic expressed in Ephesians 4:11-16. The focus was on equipping the everyday believer to grow unto a unity of the faith (doctrine of the apostles), intimacy with Christ, and a mature, Christ-like character. As people grow into their relationship with Christ, He will instruct and guide them how to minister to one another, by expressing truth in love. As each one functions according to his or her gift, the Body builds up the Body and causes growth.

Following this interactive discipleship dynamic, the early Christian movement *exploded!* By the end of the first century, it is estimated that *there were over a million followers of Jesus Christ*, most of whom were being trained and discipled in this way. And, because of the participatory, grassroots nature of the movement, when

persecution took away some of the leaders, the movement continued to expand and grow, ...because it was not dependent upon leaders, but upon the Spirit of God at work in His people.

This was the high point of the Christian movement! The church multiplied! Its strength was in the unhindered release of the Spirit through the members of the Body of Christ through interactive relationships of trust. **People were devoted to grow, to invest themselves to develop and deepen their relationships with Jesus, and to invest themselves to develop and deepen honest, positive, upbuilding relationships with each other.** They were willing to stretch and grow in new ways. They were willing to put off old behaviors and ways of thinking in order to discover what God desired to do in and with them. **They experienced God, and they expressed His love in practical ways. Even outsiders could see the transformation of life, and the acts of service and love, and their hearts were opened.**

From the beginning, there was opposition and persecution, ...but as the church was scattered, it brought the message and the ministry with them. The boldness, and the fearlessness, of the Christians, even in the face of torture and death, witnessed powerfully of the reality of their message, and the supernatural quality of life they were experiencing. **During the second and third centuries, as heretical teachings began to arise, and gain some popularity, some church leaders began to utilize the very same “control measures” used by pagan persecutors against them.** They wrote and instituted *creedal statements* that people needed to agree with. They began to *require oversight of meetings* by recognized representatives of church leaders. They tried to control and limit the “wildfire” of the Holy Spirit in order to prevent error. They did not trust that God would sort things out. **Hierarchy began to creep into the church.** As part of a defense or explanation for religious oversight, **the idea of sacerdotalism began to creep in.** This was the belief that the religious *leaders* function as “mediators of God’s grace”. The word “priest” comes from the Greek word, *presbyteros*, which is correctly translated as “elder” in our NT. **By the end of the second century, most religious leaders were called “sacerdos” (Latin) or “priests”.**

Along with these developments of control came a lessening of the interactive nature of Body-life. People were not encouraged to participate, other than to respectfully attend and comply with the instructions of leaders. **There was less talk and instruction about the Holy Spirit, and more emphasis on following moral standards and keeping the law. There was a shift away from expecting any significant interaction from the average person.** In fact, the focus of the entire meeting was more on listening to, and responding to, the leadership of the *sacerdos* or “priest”, than about expecting God to show up, or to work through His people. **The people were all but silenced, and their thoughts or ministry was no longer sought or expected.**

These changes did not happen all at once, ...or everywhere at once. Healthy Christianity was still at work in the world, alongside of this change of dynamic. The pressure to control seemed to originate in the larger population centers, where religious leaders already had more recognition and influence. In the rural areas, where there was little of significance in the way of wealth, prestige or influence, it took longer for “control measures” to extend their reach. **So the rate of explosive growth continued, where the *ekklēsia* was healthy and functional, ...but it was starting to drop off.** Nevertheless, by 300 A. D., the Christians comprised 10% of the population of the Roman empire.

In 303, however, the last and greatest persecution of Christians under the Roman emperors took place. Diocletian rescinded the legal rights of Christians, and required the universal offering of a sacrifice to the Roman gods. He demanded that they abandon Christ and comply with traditional Roman religious practices. There were three separate edicts of persecution during the next ten years, and thousands were imprisoned, tortured, martyred, banished or suffered the confiscation of their property. **In 313, however, the new emperor, Constantine, signed the Edict of Milan, allowing for religious tolerance, and the persecutions stopped. Constantine favored Christianity, and sponsored the building of churches all over the empire, at government expense.** These were large lecture halls. **Unwittingly, these very spaces, which had so graciously been provided by the Roman government, spelled the demise of the interactive church that had still remained.** Because of the size of the space, everyone had to be quiet so that the priest could be heard. **The unhealthy dysfunction that had crept in during the second century was now set in Roman cement.** Although a large number of pagans chose to become Christians, to curry favor with the emperor, or out of fear, **for the next 1200 years, the growth of the church would bump along at about a 1.5% growth rate.** Then, to make matters worse, this same emperor, Constantine, decided to build a new capital city, in Greece, which he named after himself, Constantinople. When it was time to move to his new palace, the question came up, “What do we do with the old palace?” Constantine graciously decided to dedicate it to the church, and it became the dwelling place of the bishop of Rome. Siricius, a later Roman bishop living in that very palace, began to think of himself as pretty important, ...the *most important* and *spiritually authoritative* of the bishops of the church. He began to refer to himself as the “Papa”, or Pope. Other bishops did not ever recognize this claim to superiority.

Some people call this 1200 years “the Roman captivity of the church”, and for good reason. This was the beginning of the “Dark Ages”, not only for civilization, but certainly for the dynamics of the Body of Christ.