

When the Church Assembles By Joseph Horevay

If we nod in assent to the expression “the unexamined life is not worth living” (Socrates) should we in turn broaden that to our lives as disciples of Jesus and say: The unexamined Church life is not worth living? Perhaps Jodocus von Lodenstein (Dutch Reformed Theologian 1620-1677) is writing in that same spirit when he said: “Ecclesia reformata quia semper reformanda est” (“The Church is Reformed, because its Always Reforming”).

While truth is immutable and perfect, our understanding and practice of truth is not. Just as it is possible for one generation to depart from truth and obedience, a subsequent generation may rediscover neglected truth and obey it. That is the impulse behind reformation, renewal and revival movements. In this spirit we are called to “remember the former things” (Isaiah 46:9). The sanctified life is one where we are continually discarding old ways and embracing God’s ways, progressively, as we learn and discover His ways. Our understanding of Church life should flex in the same way.

Together let’s ask: How would Jesus like to conduct His Church? What practices does Jesus expect when His Church assembles? In what way must we bend and adjust in doing His will when we assemble in His name? Does the Bible voice those expectations clearly?

Authority

I am presupposing that the New Testament scriptures actually speak plainly and authoritatively on that topic. I am also assuming that Church life is not a vast grey area where we are to grope and grasp for clear Biblical direction. Yes, there exists in the scripture clear standards and expectations about practices that constitute the regular church meeting. These texts are not esoteric, mysterious and unattainable by common men. Now, with the aide of the Holy Spirit, the first line of consultation is the Bible.

Is it understood that apostolic instructions are binding on us. These are to be viewed as the Word of God, representing Jesus’ will for His body, the Church. This is where it gets tough for many of us: It is also understood that all later developments, practices, traditions regarding Church meetings and life, regardless of how sincere or meaningful, are not equal to the Word of God. Such practices must be made secondary to it. If any practice supplants Biblical directives the question is: should the competing practice be viewed as neutral or disobedient, sinful and at worse idolatrous?

Let me suggest that practices of the gathered Church of this or any era, when evaluated by a biblical criteria can fall in a variety of categories. Those categories from best to worst are:

1. Biblically essential. The scriptures command these to happen during the primary meeting of the church.
2. Biblically valid: A meeting form that is modeled in the New Testament but is not the norm for the primary assembly of the saints.
3. Biblically permissible: A practice which is not forbidden by the scriptures nor modeled by the New Testament.
4. Disobedient to the scriptures: practices that undermine the clear commands about the assembled Church in their primary gathering.
5. Idolatrous: Those practices of the assembled Church that stand in opposition to the Person and the Work of Christ as understood in the New Covenant.

Choosing Our Models

If we select our models for doing and being church from a post-apostolic example, let's say late second century or fifth or even seventeenth century, Geneva or the more modern, revivalistic Azusa Street, circa 1906, then perhaps we are drawing our inspiration from an inadequate source. Every period of church history offers us something, it though is incumbent upon us to filter the counsel of history through the grid of apostolic instruction.

Contrasting Old and New Covenants

The Mosaic law prescribed specific activities and actions of assembled Israel: of the priests in the tabernacle, laws concerning offerings and sacrifices and specific commands regarding worship. Deviation from those laws were subject to divine sanction. To ignore those commands would undermine the critical elements of that covenant God instituted to enable His people to walk with Him. Those commands were binding and necessary till Jesus' substitutionary sacrifice on the cross when the Temple veil was rent from top to bottom forever eliminating the separation between God's covenant people and His presence.

The New Covenant, where God Himself dwells with His people is the guiding operative reality of the gathered Church. The interfacing of His people with Himself is without mediator-ship outside of the Godhead. No priesthood, no additional sacrifice or offerings is needful or wanted. No mediatorial trappings are required...no candles, no incense, no vestments, pulpits, no special architecture, icons or art. No music or choirs, instruments or robes, steeples or bells....none of it required nor as for clarity, necessarily forbidden. The equation for essential element of the gathered church is : when two or more are gathered in My Name, there I AM in your midst.

The promised Name of Emmanuel or God with us is the prophetic designation of the Messiah, Jesus both in His incarnation and in His post-ascension ministry in His manifest presence with-in His Church. "It is better for you that I go away" said Jesus. He adds "I will be with you, even until the end of the age." In light of this we affirm along with the writer of Hebrews that the New Covenant is indeed the 'Better Covenant'.

Too Good, yet true

Is He with us or is this the hyperbole of sentiment? Is He actually supernaturally present when we assemble in His Name. Is He supernaturally present at a million different locations around the globe as His church assembles in twos and threes and in two-thousands and three thousands? Christ with His assembled church in one thousand separate languages and one thousand separate ethnic groups. Peoples as diverse as Mongolians, Xhosa, Canadian, Russian, Tibetan, Nepali, Saudi Arabian and American are meeting in His Name and experiencing His presence.

The Regulative Principle

The evangelical discussion about the practices pertaining to worship and what can or should constitute the Christian "service" has tended to gravitate to one or another guiding principle.

1. The first says "what ever is not forbidden is permitted".
2. The other and opposite position is "what ever is not specifically permitted is forbidden.

The first will allow for many diverse practices and styles, liturgical or informal, The second only permits practices explicitly mentioned in the New Testament. This would include singing psalms only

(psalms, hymns and spiritual songs according to the most rigorous restrictions would be three varieties of Biblical psalmody), prayers and preaching. If the adherents are also cessationist, and most are, then publicly interpreted tongues, prophecy and all other gifts listed in 1 Corinthians 12 are forbidden as well.

The First Century Experience

The scriptures paint a reasonably vivid picture of what the ancient Christian assembly looked like, at least in its essential features. The majority of the apostolic descriptions are found in 1 Corinthians chapters eleven through fourteen where Paul the apostle gives regulations for meeting. The Christian assembly consisted of a love feast which culminated in the Lord's Supper (communion, eucharist) and every member participating based on their particular gifting and maturity level. From amongst those assembled people participated through sharing a doctrine or teaching, public prayers and prophetic ministry: public tongues with the companion gift of interpretation of tongues, prophecies/forth-telling the mind of God, word of knowledge, word of wisdom, established prophets sharing revelations, etc...Added to this some elders labored in the word, indicating some gatherings accommodated more developed teaching ministries. The first century new little of modern sermonizing. Teaching tended to be just a part of the meeting. The text knows nothing of teaching being limited only to local elders or visiting ministries. The contemporary concept of ordained or licensed ministers is foreign to first century experience. Clergy as a professional class did not exist. Presbyters led the local assemblies and were responsible not to direct a liturgy but to safeguard the freedom of the Spirit operating in the gathered church in accordance with apostolic directives.

The argument that The New Covenant gatherings were a modified synagogue service complete with borrowings from Jewish liturgy is not supported by the internal evidence of the text. This is especially true where congregants were primarily gentile with limited or no Jewish synagogue exposure.

Other New Testament texts hint of other public additions to the Christian gatherings. possibilities like: singing Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs (Ephesians 5:19, Colossians 3:16), singing in the spirit or tongues (1 Corinthians 14:15) , prayer for those in authority (1 Timothy 2:1-2)), praying for the sick (James 5:14-16), public reading of the scriptures including Old Testament and available New Testament writings (1 Timothy 4:13).

Social distinctions are to be minimized. The poor should not be neglected with sharing food during the common meal (1 Corinthians 11:21-22,) nor segregated in seating or hospitality (James 2:1-4). This is further emphasized by the injunction to dress modestly and without ostentation (1 Timothy 2:9-10).

In addition to this, special meetings were conducted as needed, such as where Paul preached well into the night (Acts 20:7-12) and where Paul rented the School of Tyrannus in Ephesus and taught daily from 11 a.m. till 4 p.m. for two years (Acts 19:9-10). Nothing resembling the contemporary catholic or protestant service existed in the first century under the direction of the apostles or their disciples. It is also obvious from early church history and the New Testament that itinerant teachers and prophets frequented churches as guest ministers (3 John 5-10). Perhaps special meetings beyond the love feast accommodated that opportunity.

The Day of meeting

The internal evidence of the New Testament gives no directive commands for Christian worship and gathering to take place on a particular day of the week. Sunday was not a day of rest in the Roman Empire until A.D. 321. Friday sundown to Saturday sundown would have been a separated day of

rest in Jewish dominated communities in Judea, Galilee and Samaria plus sections of some Roman and Greek cities with larger populations from the diaspora such as Alexandria in Egypt.

There is antidotal evidence that the Church often gathered on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7, 1 Corinthians 16:2, Revelation 1:10) Acts 20:7 is the most graphic: they gathered on the first day of the week to break bread and for Paul to teach, which he did all night long. Some suggest this was Saturday evening till Sunday morning using the Jewish method of computing a day. Most see this happening on Sunday evening after work. Sunday worship as the consistently set day for the church did not become uniform till the third century. Sabbath observance according to the Jewish pattern was continued by some Christians until A.D. 363 when Church authorities forbade the practice as inconsistent with the New Covenant. Transferring the attributes of the Sabbath to the Lord's Day or Sunday lacks any New Testament support as does a continuing Sabbath observance (Colossians 2:16, Romans 14:5-6).

Adding to this difficulty the Romans utilized an eight day week, this was the nundinal cycle based on a market week of eight days, this was still in wide-spread use during the apostolic period until the full acceptance of the Julian calendar by Constantine in 321 A.D. Perhaps the Beatles were not too far off when they crooned "Eight days a week, I looove you....".

We we step back and listen to the arguments and acrimony between Sabbatarians of both seventh day and Sunday varieties it seems like a tempest in a tea pot in light of history and the lack of New Testament evidence of prescriptive verses.

Sermons in the First Century

The first century new little of modern sermonizing. Teaching tended to be just a part of the meeting. The text knows nothing of teaching being limited only to local elders or visiting ministries. The contemporary concept of ordained or licensed ministers is foreign to first century experience. Clergy as a professional class did not exist. Presbyters (i.e. elders, pastors, bishops) led the local assemblies and were responsible not to direct a liturgy but to safeguard the freedom of the Spirit, the good order and the doctrine operating in the gathered church in accordance with apostolic directives. It is clear that elders were to have a teaching aptitude (1 Timothy 3:2, Titus 1:9) and that some labored in the scriptures as a specialty.

Any discussion of church meeting practices inevitably leads to a discussion about preaching. The effective, interesting, informative, stimulating and for some, the biblical sermon is a top criteria for the consumeristic and evangelical evaluation of a church.

In the apostolic-era church there indeed was teaching and instruction. To compare this with a contemporary sermon or homily is making an assumption that our experience and style was theirs. Paul the apostle even described his public speaking skills as that of one who is unlearned (idiota) in the art of oratory. Paul was not lamenting this but extolling the virtue of an unvarnished gospel message. Paul's self description does not at all mean he did not have content but that he was one who had not learned the craft or the craftiness of the professional orator, (a well documented skill in the ancient Roman and Greek world.) Paul was not a orator or sermonizer, he instead preached. Preaching is kerygma or proclamation. Preaching is a declaration of propositional truth designed to introduce hearers to response and experience. Preaching was an orderly discourse, but not dispassionate, yet typically without the pacing histrionics of revivalism. Added to this is the likelihood of question and answer dialog as a teaching mechanism consistent with the ancient socratic method and as alluded to in 1 Corinthians 14:35 and 2 Timothy 2:23-26 and 4:2.

The New Testament is somewhat limited in examples of recorded apostolic sermons. It is quite a lesson to see what the apostles taught at key historic events. The record of preaching is:

1. Peter at Pentecost (Acts 2:14-41)
2. Stephen before the Sanhedrin (Acts 7:1-60)
3. Peter after healing the crippled beggar (Acts 3:11-26)
4. Peter before the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:8-13)
5. Paul in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:13-53)
6. Paul at the Athenian Areopagus (Acts 17: 22-34),
7. Paul before King Agrippa (Acts 26:1-26),
8. Paul in Jerusalem before the Jewish rioters (Acts 22:1-21)
9. Paul in Rome addressing local Jewish leaders (Acts 28:17-31).

There are only two recorded speeches to Christians in the whole Bible. They are:

1. Peter's message to the Jerusalem Church (Acts 11:1-18) The irony of that speech is that Peter describes a vision, an angelic visitation and describes a group of "forbidden people" being filled with the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues. This is a set of topics that would set many an evangelical on edge at best and most likely out the door.
2. Paul's message to the Ephesian elders as they gathered in Miletus. Look it up, Acts 20:17-38. The instruction is practical, historical, it is extortive and it is prophetic. In spite of that, there are few elements that cause that sermon to rise to the contemporary standards of homiletic excellence yet it is the clearest description of pastoral ministry and its attendant responsibilities in all of the Bible.

It is ironic that Paul's only recorded sermon directed to believers is exclusively to pastors and yet it stands in stark contrast to what modern pastors, churches and seminaries expect to be produced in homilies and sermons week in and week out.

The Drift

Beginning in the late second century and gaining momentum through the fourth century, Christian assemblies came to more formally revolve around two aspects of worship. The first, and most emphasized aspect was the Communion service, the second, the homily complete with a liturgy or order of service. The love feast as a part of the communion experience, gradually was discontinued in urban areas of the Empire in response to a imperial bans on suspicious, potentially seditious fraternal feasts and periodic persecutions. The organization of the service began to solidify and have a unified, say catholic or universal form. A Christian "service in North Africa would have many of the same recognizable features as one in Britain or India. Later, assemblies ventured outside the home as persecution lifted. The size of the eucharistic celebrations grew and in time began to embrace influences from the larger Roman culture. With Imperial Roman approval and influence the large public Church assemblies moved from simplicity to pomp. The core of the first century Christian meeting dynamic was lost. What remained was a fossilized outline of a former life.

Perhaps the sober warning of Revelation 2:4-5 came to pass: "But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent." When our first love wanes so does illumination and God's manifest presence in our lives and the assembly. The context of this is a morally, persevering and doctrinally rigorous church that had walked away from it first love (Revelation 2: 2-3, 6).

The idea of a unified liturgy done by all churches everywhere became an assumption. The magisterial reformation did not challenge this assumption, it simply changed aspects of the forms. In pre-Reformation church services the center of activity was the altar. After the Reformation the center of the service was the pulpit. In each case the congregation were spectators while the clergy did the work.

Mending the torn veil

James when addressing the assembled Church in Jerusalem referenced the prophetic promise that God purposed for the “Last Days” in that He would rebuild the fallen booth (tent or tabernacle) of David (Acts 15:13-19). This was prophesied in Amos 9:11-12 and it referenced when David brought the Ark into Jerusalem as recorded in 1 Chronicles Chapters 15 & 16. This odd period was between the discontinuance of Tabernacle sacrifice and the building of the new Temple by Solomon. At this interim period the Ark was kept in a modest tent where David led Israel in extravagant worship. In this season the approach toward God was with out a veil separating the people of God from the presence of God. His presence, His Holy of Holies was in essence broken out among the people of God. It was no longer only approachable by the High Priest but by all the people.

In time the Ark returned to a consecrated space, the newly constructed Holy of Holies in Solomon’s Temple once again came to be visited only by the High Priest. It remained secluded, concealed by the massive veil, many inches thick.

The temptation for the Church is to look to the model of the temple or tabernacle and respond with a New Testament-style priesthood, service, liturgy and the like. The model for us should be the accessibility of David’s Tabernacle....no veil...open access to the presence of God. If our experience with the Christian faith is not experiential with the Presence of God, readily accessible all day long, we perchance have responded to a religious model that has rehung and re-stitched the rent veil.

The First Thing to Go

When we speak of simple church and Spirit-led gatherings of Christians we may be tempted to think “well this looks easy”. Yes, this is easy in some ways. House church has a certain simplicity because it has no need for a public building, sound system, bulletin, musicians and a dozen other things required for large gatherings. Yet it is actually the hardest to do because it requires active, daily intimacy with Christ. Apart from knowing Christ, hearing His voice, ability to grow and operate in the gifts of the Holy Spirit, a simple church would lack vital parts of its spiritual core. The eucharist and Bible instruction are the only other fixed elements that can be done, and are done in Churches around the world, without the certainty of an intimate relationship with Christ.

When the assembled church has failed to passionately pursue Christ and live a Spirit-filled life it becomes impossible to function as Christ’s supernatural assembly. When that happens the void is filled with religious activities. It take little active relationship with Christ to conduct a song service, follow an order of service and deliver a sermon.

Primary and Secondary Meetings of the Church

The primary meeting

The prescriptive nature of 1 Corinthians 14:26 commands: “ What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be

done for building up....” As we read through chapters eleven through fourteen of 1 Corinthians we see the common elements of the assembly of the saints:

1. Every member ministry. Meeting size and style can accommodate everyone participating.
2. Elements of worship: psalms, hymns and spiritual songs shared.
3. Supernatural aspects of the Holy Spirit’s ministry through the participants: prophecy, words of knowledge, interpreted tongues and prayer for the sick.
4. Orderliness in the meeting.
5. The presence of leadership that facilitates and when necessary evaluates.
6. A common meal is shared.
7. The Lord’s Supper is celebrated.
8. Non-exclusive: There are believers, mature plus some total novices and visiting non-believers.

These meeting elements are the prescriptive elements for the assembled Church. When these elements are present, even if is the smallest of the church’s meetings it should be considered the primary meeting. This is where the greatest amount of spiritual growth and engagement happens.

secondary meetings

The larger celebration or teaching meeting will often have elements of the smaller primary meeting but due to time constraints, size and focus, accomplishes something very different. The larger meeting in part is a cultural accommodation to the tastes and preferences of people from a Christian or church background.

The large worship experience can be delightful and inspiring, with music, singing, artistic expression and Christ and Biblio-centric oratory and teaching. The secondary meetings can be used for vision casting, guest speakers, biblical exposition, in non-literate societies, for the public reading of the scriptures, special prayer assemblies or simply a large celebration. If the larger secondary celebration meeting is on a Sunday it can also satisfy the preferences of Sunday sabbatarians.

The key is expectation. The large secondary meeting fits the description of most church services as currently conducted. These larger events should not be boycotted on the basis of idealism, despised or discarded. Simply reassign them to a more appropriate status. The big meetings in a simple church world are simply secondary.

Two Common Mistakes

When churches implement a cell group or home group component there are typically two mistakes made:

1. First the small group or cell does not have the liberty to break bread and celebrate communion. The small group is given a narrow task: prayer or Bible study or some other narrowly defined activity. This fails to equal what is expected biblically of a Church. Because it is deficient it fails to be able to sustain the spiritual life of participants.
2. The Big meeting, typically on Sunday is still for all concerned, THE church meeting. It is the most promoted, most resource dependent and the object of most people’s attention. It is also the most impersonal and least effective for discipleship when compared to simple church done well.

Conclusion

In pursuit of God and an authentically Biblical approach to Church we would do well to walk with grace, humility and charity. We have all benefitted from traditional structures and approaches.

Although new wine often calls for new wine skins we should transition with grateful hearts. As Glen Roachelle sagely commented :

”So many times, we think we need to “adversarialize” the past in order to justify the new transition. Exit lines are just that. Recognize them; take them; move on in gratitude and faith.

If you leave an Interstate, you don’t have to first find fault with it in order to feel good about off-ramping onto HW 50. You just flip on the turning signal, move to the right lane and take the exit.

I pray that God will grant you the grace to make graceful exits with gratitude for the past and maintain anticipation for the future.”

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