

What Must Happen When the Church Gathers

Introduction

In our last session we saw that the Holy Spirit has been given a special baptizing ministry since the Day of Pentecost when the church began. This baptizing ministry functions to join a new believer into the Body of Christ, which is the church. Remember that this happens the moment a person puts their trust in Christ for salvation, and this is what makes a believer a member of the church in the truest sense.

In the last session we also took a brief look at the responsibilities that a member of the Body of Christ has in the three primary relationships in his or her life: the relationship to God, the relationship to other believers, and the relationship to unbelievers in the world. Once a person becomes a member of the Body of Christ (the Church), then there are new duties and desires for service that begin to grow in the heart.

In this session we promised that we would begin to look at the function of the local church, the local gathering of believers, and how this fellowship should function to help each believer to fulfill the new responsibilities that were given to them as a member of the Body of Christ.

What must happen when the local church gathers?

Whatever the local gathering of members of the Body of Christ does, it must help each individual believer to fulfill his or her personal responsibilities to God and others. We might picture it this way. The local gathering of members of the Body of Christ provides an opportunity for the Holy Spirit to minister to each member through the other members.

One theologian put it this way: "In reality, the ministry of the church is the ministry of the Spirit which is divided among the various members, each contributing his gift to the total work of the church. The universality of the ministry is evident in the gifts of the Spirit given to each member in the church for the ministry. ... Some may share similar gifts but these would reveal themselves through different personalities in a great variety of ministries."

[Saucy, *The Church in God's Program*: 128, 133]



The local gathering of the church provides an environment where believers can minister to each other and build each other up in their faith. Believers can become better equipped with the knowledge and

skills and attitudes and behaviors that will enable them to better fulfill their personal responsibilities to God and others in every area of their lives. By providing an orderly and structured setting, the local gathering of members of the Body of Christ can facilitate the proper use of the various spiritual gifts so it accomplishes the goal of helping believers to grow to spiritual maturity.

What is edification?

In First Corinthians, the apostle Paul wrote to a local church to deal with specific problems they were having in their fellowship. One of these problems was the misuse of spiritual gifts within the Body of Christ. The Corinthian believers were using their spiritual gifts for selfish purposes, rather than for the good of others within the body. They were especially emphasizing the miracle or “sign” gifts, which had been given early in the growth of the church to authenticate the Word of God.

Paul directly addressed the issue of how the spiritual gifts were to be used in the church, and he gave the ultimate answer to the question “What must happen when the local church gathers?” in 1 Corinthians chapter 14. I'd like to highlight verses 12 and 26 which show the ultimate purpose for the use of spiritual gifts in the body of Christ.

- 1 Cor 14:12 So also you, since you are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek to abound for the edification of the church.
- 1 Cor 14:26 What is the outcome then, brethren? When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification.

Edification is not one of those words that we use in our everyday speech, but here Paul used it twice in just a few verses. He said that all of the things we do when we gather together in the local meeting of the Body of Christ must be done for the edification of the body.

The English dictionary defines edification as: “A building up, in a moral and religious sense; instruction; improvement and progress of the mind, in knowledge, in morals, or in faith and holiness.” The actual Greek term is a compound word with the first part meaning “house” and the second part meaning “to build.” So the word picture is one of building up the members of the body of Christ in a way that is similar to building a house, bringing it to completion by starting with the right foundation and building up from there. Whatever is done when the church meets, it must be done for the building up and instruction of believers for growth toward spiritual maturity. We could picture the proper function of the local church this way:



How is Edification to happen?

In order to build something of quality, you need to work with the right building materials – and the best building material for spiritual life is the Word of God. In gatherings of the local church, the Word of God is the most important component, because that is the primary tool for building up the body of Christ. Let's trace the importance of the Word of God through the records of the early church.

Continually devoted to the Word of God (Acts 2:42)

When the church began after the giving of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2, the newborn church continually devoted itself to “The Teaching” (literally translated). Their primary focus was to continue steadfastly as learners of the truths of the Word of God. Notice that they did not devote themselves first to their leaders, or to their good works of service, or to the observance of religious ceremonies. There are many churches today who spend their time devoting themselves to going through the motions of their religious ceremonies and rituals. But the example of the early church was that they devoted themselves to the teaching of the truths of the Word of God.

True “church growth” is growth in the Word of God (Acts 6:4, 7; 12:24; 19:20)

Walking through the book of Acts a little further we see additional evidence of the importance of the Word of God. The church had grown in numbers to such an extent that main church leaders could no longer administer every aspect of its work. They brought in some helpers to take care of things like the distribution of food to elderly widows. This freed the leadership to “devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word” (Acts 6:4). The result of this decision was expressed in Acts 6:7 -- “The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.” Notice that this passage does not merely say that believers kept on multiplying, although many more people were being joined to the Body of Christ through the baptizing ministry of the Holy Spirit. The focus of this passage is on the fact that the Word of God kept on spreading. So true church growth cannot be separated from growth in the Word of God. The teaching of the Word of God must expand in order for church growth to happen.

One of the things that many churches focus on today is “church growth” -- and there is a whole “church growth” movement which focuses on increasing the numbers of people and the funding of programs. They use radio announcements, mailings, door flyers, and other marketing tools to attract the unsaved members of the community into the Sunday church meeting. If you are marketing the church and attracting people into the Sunday gatherings, but you are not helping believers to grow to spiritual maturity through the teaching of the Word of God, then can that be considered to be biblical church growth??? The answer is, NO. According to the Scriptures, this is a misplaced focus. Church growth does not consist in “Nickels and Noses” -- true biblical church growth must be measured by growth in the Word of God. Growth in the teaching of the Scriptures is what causes the number of disciples to increase. The church should devote itself to the ministry of the Word and leave the numbers to God.

In Acts 12:24 after the miraculous death of the wicked, ungodly King Herod, it says, “But the word of the Lord continued to grow and to be multiplied.” Here it doesn't even say that the number of people increased. It is the increase in the teaching of the Word of God that is the measuring stick or speedometer for the positive forward movement of the church.

In Acts 19:20, after Paul's encounter with the sorcerer, we read, "So the word of the Lord was growing mightily and prevailing." Again, this passage does not say that great numbers of people became believers. The Scriptures focus on growth in the Word of the Lord rather than on growth in the typical metrics used by the "church growth" movement today.

The Example of the Apostle Paul (Acts 20:7, 27; 31-32)

If we look at this passage we will see Paul's example of his typical practice when he met with the local gatherings of believers. He could have given inspirational "self-help" workshops, or healing services, or counseling seminars. But this is the recorded practice of the apostle Paul: "On the first day of the week (Sunday, rather than the Jewish practice of meeting on the Sabbath or Saturday), when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul began talking to them, intending to leave the next day, and he prolonged his message until midnight" (Acts 20:7)

Later when Paul met with the leaders of the churches in Ephesus, he declared, " For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God....Therefore, be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears. And now I commend you to God and to the Word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified." (Acts 20:27, 31-32) Paul commended them to God and to the Word of God, not to their leaders or to their works of service or to their ceremonial rituals. Paul simply proclaimed the truths of God's Word to anyone who would listen.

The Instructions given by the apostle Paul (1 Tim 4:13; 2 Tim 2:2; 4:1-2; Titus 1:9)

Not only did the apostle Paul practice the teaching of the Word of God, but he specifically instructed others to do the same in the Pastoral Epistles – the letters to Timothy and Titus which he wrote at the end of his life telling them what must happen when the local church gathers together.

1 Tim 4:13 "Until I come, give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching." Paul instructed church leaders to read Scripture aloud and to teach the truths of the Word of God.

2 Tim 2:2 "The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also." The teaching of the truths of God's Word must be the central focus of church leaders, and they must pass on The Teaching to faithful men who can teach others also.

2 Tim 4:1-2 "I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: ... preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction." Paul wrote these words to one of the key leaders in the churches at Ephesus. Notice Paul did not tell him to conduct marketing campaigns or inspirational seminars, nor did he tell this man to conduct detailed "fruit inspections" of the members of the local assembly and to chastise them for their unfaithfulness – what we might call "beating the sheep into submission."

Titus 1:9 "Hold fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict." Here Paul instructed Titus to

appoint church leaders who would cling to the truths of God's Word so they could teach believers which direction they should go, as well as correct them when they stray off the path of truth.

So as we have surveyed some of the records of the early church, it has become clear that the teaching of the Word of God should be the primary means for helping believers to grow in spiritual maturity and to fulfill their God-given responsibilities as members of the Body of Christ.

Why so much emphasis on the Teaching of the Word?

Learning from the Word of God is the only way believers can grow in the following areas:

Faith (Romans 10:17; 2 Timothy 3:14-15) Hearing and understanding the Word is what brings a person to salvation and faith in Christ.

Knowledge of God (Colossians 1:9-10) The Bible emphasizes knowing God over experiencing God. A proper knowledge of God in a right relationship with God leads to positive experiences with God, and not the other way around. An emphasis on the subjective, self-centered experience of God often leads away from a true knowledge of God and obedience to His Word.

Obedience (John 14:15, 21, 24) Obedience to God cannot happen without first having a knowledge of God's will through His Word.

Transformation (John 17:17; Romans 12:2; Hebrews 4:12) It is the Word of God that changes people as the Holy Spirit applies it to the human heart.

Equipping for Ministry (2 Timothy 3:16-17) "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; ... so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work."

Without an emphasis on the Word of God within the gatherings of the local body of believers, none of these things would be possible.