

Activities for Equipping in the Church

Introduction

In our last session we saw that the local gathering of the members of the body of Christ on Sunday morning should edify or build up believers and equip them to do the work of ministry. We saw that Christ gave gifted believers to the church for this purpose, and the body of Christ was to continue building itself up in love, week after week, until all of the members of the church are brought to spiritual maturity.

This kind of maturity involves growth in our understanding of the truths of God's Word, which leads to increased wisdom and discernment in our attitudes and actions. All believers should be growing toward this goal, and we should see clear progress toward maturity as a result of the equipping time on Sunday mornings in church. Now in this session we will be talking about some of the activities for the church that will help it fulfill its purpose to build up and equip the body of Christ.

Organization in the Local Gatherings of the Body of Christ

The Church -- the "Body of Christ" -- is not something man-made. Men did not bring it into existence. As we have previously discussed, only the Lord Jesus Christ can build the church and baptize believers by the Holy Spirit to unite them with the Body of Christ (Matt 16:18; Acts 2:47; Mark 1:8; 1 Cor 12:13). Since this is the case, no denomination has the right to claim that it is the one and only true church. Christ knows His own and His own know Him (John 10:14), but sometimes His own do not recognize each other very well.

Local churches began in a very simple way. In the beginning there was only one local church, the Church at Jerusalem, and it appears that the meetings were held in homes and publicly available gathering places. At first there was no formal organization, but simply a desire for fellowship, companionship, and cooperation among the small group of believers. As a result of the soul-winning event on the Day of Pentecost, ultimately there were similar local gatherings of believers all across the known world, and gradually the local meetings of the members of the body of Christ began to have more organization and structure.

Early in the history of the church there were already some indications of simple organization in the local gatherings of members of the body of Christ. In fact, the very idea of a group meeting requires some kind of organization and coordination. Example from real life!

Here are some of the evidences of organization in the history of the NT church:

- The believers established regularly meeting times and places (John 20:19; Acts 2:46; 20:7; Heb 10:25)
- They practiced public baptisms and celebrated the Lord's Supper (Acts 2:41-42)
- They collaborated on providing assistance for needy members (Acts 2:44-45)
- They met for public worship and prayer (Acts 2:42, 46)
- Later the local gatherings of believers had designated local leaders, and the qualifications for leadership required a long-term association in a close personal relationship (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5)

- They evaluated the behavior of members and exercised church discipline (Romans 16:17; 1 Cor 5; 2 Cor 2)
- They kept a registry of the elderly widows under the church's care (1 Tim 5:9)
- They raised money for the Lord's work in conjunction with other local churches in their regions (Rom 15:26; 1 Cor 16:1-2; 2 Cor 8 - 9)
- They sent letters of recommendation to other churches on behalf of traveling Christian workers (Acts 18:24-28; Rom 16:1-2; 2 Cor 3:1)

All of these activities made it a necessity for some form of organization or structure.

The Pattern of the Early Church

You probably noticed that many of the verses cited a moment ago came from the second chapter of the book of Acts. That being the case, I'd like to focus on the central passage in that section which describes the practices of the early church (Acts 2:42).

Acts 2:42 says, "They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." (NASB)

In the original language, the phrase "they were continually" is contained in a single Greek word -- the subject being contained within the verb. And this verb is in the imperfect tense, which is often translated as a simple past tense in English. However, the idea of the imperfect tense is one of continuous action in past time. That is why the translators of the NASB have included the word continually in this verse (even though the word itself does not appear in the original language). It was the on-going habit or practice of the early church to do all of the activities in the following list on a regular basis.

"They"

Let's first focus on the subject of the sentence, "They." Who does "they" refer to? The context will tell us. Acts 2:41 says, "So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls." The subject of verse 42, then, is the ones who had received his word -- the new believers who had been added to the body of Christ, or the church. Today many churches believe that the way to do church is bring unbelievers to the Sunday morning meetings, to preach the gospel, and hopefully to see some become believers. But as we saw last session in Eph 4:11-16 and we see now from Acts 2:42, even the first gatherings of the church were focused on believers. A fundamental mistake that many churches make is trying to create an atmosphere where unbelievers will feel comfortable in the Sunday church gathering, but as we explained in our last session, when the church gathers together to meet, the focus should be on the believers.

If unbelievers do happen to come into the assembly, then they may (or may not) be convicted by the Holy Spirit through the teaching of the Word of God. The apostle Paul described how the presence of unbelievers in the church gathering is incidental or secondary -- the primary focus of the Sunday meetings should be on the edification of believers.

1Co 14:23 Therefore if the whole church assembles together and all speak in tongues, and ungifted men or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are mad?

1Co 14:24 But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an ungifted man enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all;

1Co 14:25 the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so he will fall on his face and worship God, declaring that God is certainly among you.

1Co 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.

The purpose of the church gathering is to edify and equip the saints for the work of ministry.

“Were Continually Devoting Themselves”

We can see from the text that the activity being referred to is being carried out continually, or regularly, or on an on-going basis. This was a regular practice of the early church. As soon as the church was born in Acts chapter two, the believers immediately began the practice of regularly meeting together for specific purposes.

The word “devoting” is a Greek participle -- it is a “verbal noun” (for which we do not have a corresponding English concept). This Greek participle is a compound word consisting of a preposition and a verb that have been joined together to intensify or focus the meaning of the term. The basic Greek verb is “kartereo” which means to be strong, steadfast, or enduring. This term by itself is a strong word! But the preposition “pros” on the front of the verb serves to focus or give direction to the meaning of the term -- like putting a magnifying glass on the word to sharply focus its energy. The term “proskartereo,” then, is a directed form of the word which means to be strong toward something, to be steadfast to something, to persevere in something, or to be busily engaged in something. This immediately brings to mind the question, “What is the something which they were continuing in?” There are four things that are the object of this sentence.

1. “To The Teaching of the Apostles”

Most English Bibles translate this as, “to the apostles' teaching.” But the original Greek phrase says “to the teaching of the apostles.” In the English translation one could almost get the idea that they devoted themselves to the apostles because that word comes before the word teaching. But the original language emphasizes that the object of their devotion was the teaching. The apostles were simply a channel for this teaching -- it was the teaching itself that was to be the object of their devotion.

The Greek word “teaching” can mean the process of instruction as well as the content of the teaching. This implies that they were devoting themselves to being involved in the teaching process -- being involved as a learner -- as well as implying that they were devoting themselves to the content of the teaching. In our last session we discussed how the phrase “The Faith” indicates the body of teaching or the content of what we believe from the Scriptures. This also applies to the phrase “The Teaching” in Acts 2:42 -- it was the set of truths from the Scriptures, and especially the new revelation that was being given to the apostles and prophets during the transitional time when the church was first getting started.

This is a good place to point out that there are “definite articles” at the beginning of each of these phrases listing their objects of devotion. In the original Greek we see “to THE teaching” and “to THE fellowship” and “THE breaking of THE bread” and “to THE prayers.” The writer could have left off the

definite article, and it would have been translated “A Teaching.” But they were not to devote themselves to just any teaching -- it was a specific set of truths that they were to focus on -- “The Faith” which was once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 1:3).

The apostles were functioning as the teachers -- really they were functioning as the elders of the first church. And one of the primary functions of the elders or church leaders is to teach the truths of Scripture. One must be able to teach the truths of Scripture in order to be qualified as an elder of the church. The primary purpose -- the very first thing in the list of what must happen when the church gathers -- is the teaching of the truths of the Word of God.

2. “To The Fellowship”

The word for fellowship is “koinonia” and this was the second object of their devotion in this listing. This term primarily means “sharing in common.” It implies a close personal relationship and an active participation with each other’s lives. Acts 2:44 says that they had all things in common. What are some of the things they had in common? They had a common faith -- they had all placed their trust in Christ for their salvation, and this was a deep bond of commonality. They shared common interests, for example, in the Bible. There were dangers they shared in common -- putting their lives on the line for their faith. They shared a common hope for the future -- the coming of the Lord in the clouds to rapture His church. They also shared their possessions and resources as anyone had need of them. This is THE fellowship that you can have with other believers.

Fellowship is one of the ways that members of the body of Christ are to be built up or edified. The apostle Paul spoke of sharing one another’s experiences (1 Cor 12:26). He also spoke of sharing one another’s burdens (Gal 6:2). You can probably think of a time in your own life when another believer came along-side you at a difficult time in your life and shared your burdens. Remember what a comfort that was? It was a living picture of the comforting ministry that the Holy Spirit Himself has in our lives.

Can this type of close personal relationship happen in a church of several thousand people? No, in order for this kind of fellowship to occur the gathering needs to be small enough for deep relationships to develop. This certainly speaks positively for the idea of small churches rather than mega-churches -- it is an advantage of smallness. As we serve in the church, we don’t need to focus on growth in numbers at the expense of close personal relationships. We need to remain small enough so that we can actively participate in each other’s lives.

3. “[to] The Breaking Of The Bread”

The breaking of bread could be a reference to the Lord’s Supper, or it could refer to the regular meals that the believers shared together. The context indicates that this refers primarily to the regular meals that the believers shared. Acts 2:46 says they were, “breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart.” We know, however, that when Christ instituted the Lord’s Supper it came at the end of a special meal together. For the early church, taking a meal together was an act of fellowship -- but they often closed their meals with the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, just as Jesus did when He instituted the practice.

One thing this tells us is that it does not require an ordained minister to serve the Lord’s Supper. Jesus did not say that a special class of believers were the only ones who could conduct this ceremony -- like the priesthood of the Old Testament. You do not have to be an ordained minister or

priest, you do not have to wear a special robe or sash, you do not have to perform a special hand gesture or ritual to celebrate the Lord's Supper. This is something that common Christians can do whenever they gather.

4. "To The Prayers"

The word for prayer is one of the most general words for prayer in the Greek language. This is one of those cases where the Greek language has several different words which are all translated by a single English word. So when you see the English word "prayer" in the New Testament, it is important to find out which Greek word was used so that you can clearly understand the specific meaning that is intended. The word used in Acts 2:42 is "proseuche" and it includes praise, adoration, giving God glory, thanksgiving, petition (asking), and confession. It is always used of prayer to God. There are other Greek words for prayer that focus more specifically on a particular aspect of prayer. For example "aiteo" means to ask for something; "erotao" means to ask a question; "deomai" means to beg.

The type of prayer mentioned in Acts 2:42 is the same kind of prayer mentioned in Acts 1:14 when the disciples were devoting themselves to prayer in the upper room as they awaited the coming of the Holy Spirit and the beginning of the church. They didn't know what else to do, so they devoted themselves to group prayer. They gathered and prayed aloud together, rather than simply having silent prayer just between an individual and God. They focused their collective attention and energy toward God. We could legitimately extend this concept to include our worship of God -- praising and glorifying our Creator and Redeemer.

The Greek word that is normally translated "worship" in the NT is the word "proskuneo" -- which means (literally) "to kiss towards." In that culture it sometimes signified falling upon the knees and touching the ground with the forehead as an expression of profound reverence, so the word meant to kneel in submission, to do homage, or to bow in obedience. This word certainly expresses the attitude of worship in our relationship to our Creator God, but the word "proseuche" (prayers) includes more of the practical activities of worship, such as praise, adoration, thanksgiving, petition, confession, and giving God glory.

One theologian made an interesting comment about the worship activities of the local church: "Worship of God will suffer if the service is aimed exclusively at evangelizing the unbelievers who happen to be present. This was not the pattern of the church in the book of Acts. Rather, believers gathered to praise God and be edified; then they went forth to reach the lost in the world outside." [Erickson, 1057]

When we talked about edification we saw that it was focused on building up believers, and although worship concentrates on God, it also benefits the worshipers. In this activity the church centers its attention on who God is, and worshipers attempt to appropriately glorify God, rather than satisfying its own feelings or experiencing an emotional high.

It is interesting that the apostle Paul warned the Corinthian church against having prayers, songs, and thanksgivings that do not edify other believers, for example, because no one was present to interpret their meaning to those who do not understand (1 Cor 14:15-17). It is appropriate that the church, which belongs to God, praise and glorify him in ways that build up the entire body of believers who are gathered. [see Erickson, 1056-1057]

Conclusion

The early church made a practice of gathering together, first, to devote themselves to the teaching of the Word of God. As a result of that focus, their fellowship was very deep and meaningful. They shared meals together and celebrated the Lord's Supper. And they devoted themselves to times of group prayer, resulting in praises to God as well as confession and petition and thanksgiving. That was the pattern of the early church, and we can also follow this same pattern.

So many churches today are focused on attracting unbelievers into the church meeting so that some may be won to Christ. Winning the lost is very important, and Jesus commanded each believer to share the good news of salvation with unbelievers. But when we meet together as believers, the focus needs to be on equipping the saints for the work of ministry -- on making disciples.

The early church did more than make converts -- they made disciples. A disciple is one who is becoming a fully mature and equipped follower of Jesus Christ. So wherever you are, make sure you gather together with believers under the teaching ministry of gifted equippers who will teach the Word of God and build you up in the faith -- the attitudes and abilities and skills and knowledge that you need in order to become a fully mature follower of Jesus Christ.