

Devotional Thoughts :: Working on this teaching....

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In prayer and meditation this morning, I thought about this past weekend and what could be taught to align ourselves more appropriately with what God is doing. I sat down and typed this beginning of a lesson or talk or whatever you might call it, as I really received it from the Lord. (If ever I get to teach or preach or whatever, this is how the Lord speaks to me ; I more or less have runs of thoughts and just type it as I go.) This is not complete. Other things have to get done today, but this was so urgent in me, so I did it. After the end of this much of it, my thought is to address the operation of gifts and the flow of meeting. I have not typed out the passages cited.

Acts 2:42-47.

This earliest description of the meeting of the Holy Spirit filled followers of Jesus has historically served as the aspiration of the church when it is gathered together. Whether in large buildings, caves, huts, houses or storefronts, the church of Jesus meets wherever two or three are gathered in His Name with the joint purposes of fellowship, discipleship, and discerning truth. Matthew 18:20. Throughout the early ages, the most common expression of New Testament meetings was the small fellowship.

Acts 5:42.

Teaching was a vital part of the fellowship/discipleship/discernment of truth in the initial church. It took on different forms. Certainly, there is no evidence of one person in front of an audience who singularly speaks for a long period followed by an altar call or call to action or other admonishment, then dismissal. The evidence is that more than one person taught, that the whole body assembled together for fellowship/discipleship/discernment of truth were encouraged and expected to "one person at a time" spontaneously but in order speak as the Holy Spirit spoke to them. The hearers would discern the truth and wisdom of the speech by prayer, searching Scriptures for support and application, and by discussion (and even debate) in love. But, teaching was indispensable.

The subject of the teaching was the simple gospel of Jesus Christ. Today, we have so boiled down and distilled the gospel to a "eplan of salvation" with cherry-picked verses designed to lead someone to a decision about whether to pray to be saved that we have omitted from "ogospel" teaching the full weight of everything in the New Testament. It is true that salvation in Christ is "esimple" " thankfully so! " but it is also true that the whole counsel of the whole word of God is necessary to mature believers and to most fully equip them for dynamic life in the Body of Christ. This requires teaching and " dare we say " preaching. The apostle Paul made no bones about the importance of it. Romans 10:14-15. See, also, Acts 20:7-12.

Acts 16:29-34.

Households have been the front lines of the ever raging spiritual battle that is the kingdom of God. See, Matthew 11:12. Jesus would often shock people with miracles and teaching, not only in synagogues and in outdoor venues, but also in household contexts. Luke 14; Luke 7:36-50; Luke 10:38-42, for example. You will notice that Luke describes several of these household incidents and that he wrote Acts as well, with particular attention to the detail of God's work through and in households.

When Jesus sent the twelve disciples out, He gave them specific instructions to approach houses. Matthew 10, Luke 9. In Luke 10, He re-commissioned a group of 70 (or 72, depending on the translation) and, again, sent them to houses.

It is not a coincidence that we see Jesus personally initiating the practice of His disciples, His sent laborers, entering households. When Jesus did so with the 12 and then the 70, He aimed at the "lost house of Israel". In Acts 10, at the conversion of Cornelius, the Holy Spirit personally orchestrated that the gospel should first reach the Gentiles at the hands of Israel inside a Gentile household. In Acts 16, after the Holy Spirit called Paul and his companions into Macedonia

(the first recorded mission into Europe), the first conversion Luke notes is of the woman who sold purple goods, Lydia and her household. Likewise, the Philippian jailer was converted in Acts 16, with his household, at the teaching of Paul to the jailer's household following the miraculous release from chains again orchestrated by God.

The thrust of apostolic ministry in households in the New Testament was not only for fellowship, discipleship and discernment of truth, but momentarily included evangelism and conversion. This instructs us about how the Holy Spirit is deliberate in using households as the front lines of expansion of the kingdom of God in the hearts of people.

Acts 20:20

We do not shrink from the public or household declaration of the Word of God. It is not necessary to abandon or even criticize the large, programmatic church gathering. So much of house meeting can be overtaken by unjust distinction between the house meeting and the large, programmed meeting. The New Testament church, as it reached deeply into households, is not seen criticizing the form of synagogue proclamation or study. Paul took advantage of it, as a matter of fact. This tells us that the larger forms of gathering are not the enemy of the gospel.

But, the fact is, most people who are now not regular attenders of the larger meetings in church buildings are simply not going to start going to them. The statement is made that if church-goers would only invite non-church-goers, more non-church-goers would go to church. That is undeniable. Any event is more likely to be better attended as people are personally invited to attend by folks they know. However, for all of the innovation that church-building operators have introduced, church attendance nationwide continues to decline as a percentage of the population. Innovative forms of meeting, like praise and worship bands, casual dress, theatrical lighting and production, and the ever-present power point displays in lieu of hymnals and bibles, are generally successful only in luring large numbers of people from more traditional forms of meeting places and are not particularly more successful in converting the lost or in maturing believers in the Way of Jesus. So, church building based meetings are not the enemy of the gospel, but they do not have a particularly biblical impact on the lost or on the saved as opposed to any other form of meeting.

The temptation is to indict the church as an organized, large, centralized yet ineffective entity. If the indictment were even true, the believers who are not married to that form have no cause to issue the accusation. Jesus said of one who would decline or delay following Him in truth in order to bury a dead loved one, "Let the dead bury their dead." The explicit teaching of Jesus here is to follow Him, period. Spending any effort, time, energy, emotion or anything else in critique of the larger church building form or format is a burial to which we are not invited; it is sounding brass and tinkling cymbal and is not part of the voice of the church that is clearly calling Christians to spiritual battle. In short, criticizing the "come and see" model of the larger church-building based gathering is wasteful of the time we have, it can needlessly harm people we love and share the kingdom with, and it is disobedient to the singleness of vision that the Holy Spirit is calling His people to have in these days.

No part of the body of Christ should have anything to prove to any other part in this regard. Just as the larger gatherings can be said to produce artificial unity, household gatherers can be baited into artificial holiness that is mere sanctimony. The fact is that God is still God, and He sets the members in the body as it pleases Him, and to argue against the larger gatherings or against household gatherings is to argue against God.

Romans 16:5, 1 Corinthians 16:19, Colossians 4:15.

The apostolic expectation and norm was household gatherings. The household gathering is full of vitality and life. There is warmth, there is acceptance, there is hospitality. Note the greetings in these verses. Note, again, the emphasis Paul places on biblical leadership of these gatherings as requiring givenness to hospitality and aptness to teach. 1 Timothy 3:2, Titus 1:8. Peter echoes this need of hospitality as an apostolic expectation. 1 Peter 4:8-10. Hospitality in households would be the only way that the writer of Hebrews could urge people NOT to neglect meeting. Hebrews 10:25. Hospitality is essential.

This warm, intimate, gathering of people of God was prophetically announced in Malachi 3:16. It is stamped with the approval of God. Yet, it isn't approved just because of its form. It is approved because the form enables the substance of what God is doing to actually happen in real time in the real world.

2 Tim. 2:24-26 is exemplary here. As the believers gather in joyful warmth and intimacy, in an environment of safety and welcome, we are expected to equip ourselves and each other for this kind of helpful accountability and up-building of one another. Real lives are being lost to Satan, and real body life in the church of Jesus includes all of us as being prepa

red for this kind of work.

What must we expect to find in the local household gathering of the body of Christ, then? Accountability to one another and to the Lord. Dynamic, not static, submission and leadership. Purpose and direction. Giftedness. Certainly other factors as well.

And, that's all of it for now. Feedback, honest thoughts requested!