

Conversations for Change

Article Four:

The Church Gathered

It has been said that if a rocket leaves earth heading for the moon with its trajectory off by just a fraction of one degree, the rocket will miss the moon by thousands of miles. What appears so insignificant an issue today when stretched out over decades can be very harmful to the church. And one question that seems to have the church off-target today is this one: What is the purpose for the church gathering together? Now, there is no question whether the church should gather. We must gather! The question has to do more with what the purpose of the gathering is. One's answer to this question may send a local gathering of the church of Christ on a trajectory that over the course of time is far off target. There are three answers that the evangelical church at large believes are right on target. The evangelical church generally believes that the church gathers for worship, evangelism, or preaching / teaching.

I hope that you will patiently allow me to challenge these as primary purposes for the church gathering. My thesis for this article is that the church does not gather for the primary purpose of worshiping God, or evangelizing the lost or hearing sermons. Let me address them in that order: worship, evangelism, preaching.

The church does not gather primarily to worship God.

Although I believe that when we gather for church as well as when we do anything else we are to be worshipping God, the church gathering is not a "worship service." It is not as though we can compartmentalize life into the categories of sacred and secular. All of life lived in Christ is sacred living. All of life is worship. The way you eat and drink in a restaurant is as much a worship service as the way you partake of the Communion Table. The way you sing in your car with your stereo blasting is as much a worship service as the way you sing in church. The way you dole out money at the shopping center or car lot is as much a worship service as when you give in an offering at church. We do ourselves and God a tremendous disservice when we speak in terms of sacred and secular.

In fact, I would contend that in the life of the believer there is no distinction between sacred and secular on any level. Take literature for example. Reading a John Grisham or a Tom Clancey novel is as much sacred time as is reading a book by John Piper or Jerry Bridges. Take music as another example: listening to Garth Brooks, Elton John, Andrea Bocelli, or Celine Dion is as much sacred time or worship as is listening to the Gaithers, Michael Card, Tree 63, Newsboys, Michael W. Smith, or Mack Lynch. These things either enhance our worship or they distract us from worshipping or living for God. But the books and the songs, in and of themselves, are neither sacred nor secular. We are sacred. We are sanctified. We have been set apart by God. So you can see that there is no "service" that is to be designated as a "worship service." Instead, all of life is rendered as a sacrificial act of spiritual worship (cf. Rom. 12:1-2). So while worship is

happening when we gather as a church, it is not to say that it is substantially different or categorically distinct from anything else in life. The primary purpose of the church-gathered is not worship.

Everything about the Christian life is worship. The church-gathered is a subset of Christian living. As a believer, we are worshipping God 24 hours a day 7 days a week. Yet typically we only gather with believers once or twice a week for a few hours..

Since we have fallen into the habit of calling our gatherings “worship services,” we have subsequently fallen into a mentality that we are entering a sacred place to perform some sacred duties as we are ministered to by some sacred people. The formality of the sacred then feeds what I call “the performance monster.”

Meet the Performance Monster

Each Sunday, people come to the sacred place dressed in their sacred formal attire (“We dress in such a way as to give God our best!” they say). Upon entering the sacred place they receive the program at the door, politely smile as they are ushered to their seats, and sit quietly while they await the opening of the “service.” The prelude music softly plays in the background. Then the master of ceremonies stands to make a few general announcements and commences the program with prayer. Certain sacred people appointed for the sacred duties of “worship” appear on the stage and begin their polished and oft-rehearsed performance of “worship music.” (This music is really only deemed as “mood” music since it serves to set the stage for the oration.) Following the musicians’ performance is the main attraction. A lone man comes to the pulpit with his thoroughly prepared manuscript ready to dazzle and amaze his audience with his knowledge of all things biblical. He is a paid professional, masterfully skilled in oration (which has now been labeled as the art of “preaching.”). Upon the completion of his speech, the people rise to leave the comfort of the auditorium. As they flow out toward the parking lot, they begin to critique the service on the basis of how well the sacred people performed, met their expectations, or captivated their attention.

In this scenario there is little, if any, audience participation. And there is little to no inter-personal interaction. The “sacred” people on the stage served the “secular” people in the seats. And the “secular” people left the church knowing that they have done their sacred duty for the week – they went to church. Furthermore, the entire day is judged on the height or depth of the experience: “We need a better preacher. He is boring.” “The music was too loud.” “The air conditioning didn’t work.” “The acoustics were pathetic.” “I didn’t care for the costume that the guitarist was wearing.” They treat church the same way they would treat the Opera! In my opinion, this is due, in part, to the fact that we have treated church as a worship experience that at the end of the day can only be judged on the merits of the performance.

But read this carefully! *When we come to church we are NOT coming to a sacred place to perform sacred duties and we are NOT ministered to by sacred people. We are NOT under the old covenant with its sacred place – the Temple. We do not have sacred duties*

– sacrifices and offerings. We do NOT have sacred attire like the OT priests as if there are clothes for one day but not another. We are not served by sacred men – priests. Each one of us is a priest. The dwelling place of God on earth is within his people. And everything we do is a spiritual service of worship.

The Church does not gather primarily for evangelism.

Our church has never demonstrated this mis-emphasis as we have the former one. But many voices in our day are crying out that the gathering of the church is for the purpose of bringing lost seekers to the presentation of the gospel. Preachers are expected to deliver gospel sermons and the church is to present itself in a warm, friendly and non-threatening manner so as to welcome sinners to Christ. The litmus test for success is seen in the numbers of people who flock to the front during the altar call as they make a “decision for Christ.”

The church, by definition, is a gathering of men and women who have been effectually called out by God in Christ. The church-gathered, is by definition, for the church, not the lost. However, the Scriptures do present the possibility that on occasion an unbeliever may attend a church meeting, be convicted of his sins as the brethren minister to one another through their spiritual gifts, and be converted (1 Cor.14:24-25). Nevertheless, throughout the book of Acts, evangelism took place, not in the gatherings of believers, but where unbelievers naturally congregated, including:

1. city streets (Acts 2:12-40)
2. the temple grounds (Acts 3:1-26)
3. a desert road (Acts 8:26-40)
4. the synagogues of non-Christian Jews (Acts 9:20-22; 13:5; 13:14-41, 44-49; 14:1-3; 17:1-4; 17:10-12; 18:19; and 19:8)
5. the home of an unbeliever (Acts 10:34-43)
6. a riverside (Acts 16:13-15)
7. prisons (Acts 16:30-31; 26:1-29; 28:23-31)
8. the market place (Acts 17:17)
9. a hill dedicated to a pagan god (Acts 17:19)
10. military barracks (Acts 21:34-22:21)
11. the governor's official residence (Acts 23:35; 24:24-25)

The church gathers for mutual edification and then scatters to live life in the arena of the world where they encounter unbelievers and minister the gospel to them. Once a convert is made, that individual is baptized into the body of Christ.

When the church adopts the view that the purpose of meeting is for evangelism, its members will inevitably remain immature and shallow since the emphasis is always on the basics of the gospel. There is little time for going deeper into the truths of Scripture. Furthermore, the members will re-define evangelism as bringing people to the church so the sacred professionals can deliver the gospel. This will remove all sense of true biblical responsibility. A member of a church can honestly believe that they are involved in evangelism because they work the concession stand at a basketball tournament aimed at reaching the lost. Selling candy bars is NOT evangelism.

The Church does not gather primarily for preaching.

Here is another emphasis of ours that may be a mis-emphasis. Over the past thirteen years we have over-emphasized preaching to the exclusion of much more crucial items. Without denying the importance of sound doctrinal instruction when the church gathers (1 Tim.4:6,13,16; 5:17; 6:2,17; 2 Tim.4:1-4), we must beware of equating that instruction too rigidly with the traditional sermon – the monologue. In most churches, one man (the pastor) does all the talking, while the congregation does all the listening. There is a certain deficiency in defining preaching as “passionate monologue.” Although the traditional sermon may be helpful in instructing God's people, it does not allow God's people to be involved in teaching, exhorting or admonishing one another, and it does not allow the pastor to be ministered to by the rest of the congregation.

Furthermore, if the church adopts the view that the purpose of meeting as the church is to listen to a sermon, its members will inevitably adopt a passive attitude. They will come, take notes, and fill their minds with wonderful biblical truths, but will leave without fulfilling their God-given spiritual responsibilities. Yes, sermons can be a powerful tool in edifying the body, but sermons should not be allowed to crowd out the ministry of the rest of the church.

So, What does the church primarily gather for?

I want to examine this in the next article. We need to carefully examine two passages that describe the purpose of the church gathering: 1 Corinthians 14 and Hebrews 10. In those passages we will discover that *the church gathers primarily for mutual edification and encouragement*. The church is formulated by Christ into a body of believers and is called the family of God. In order for the church to exist as a family of believers, there must be mutual ministry happening.