



An Order of Service? For the Gathering of the Saints

We who have grown up in the more “Traditional” Church settings, which are often characterized by a predictable “order of service” controlled by the hierarchy, have longed for and almost demanded a more “free flowing” type of environment in the smaller house gatherings, and rightly so.

So the title I have chosen for this study is given with “tongue-in-cheek.” Nevertheless, while we will and should no longer tolerate a hierarchically controlled service, other than the hierarchy of the Lord Jesus Himself, it does appear the apostles were given instructions from the Lord as to many of the elements of the times of gatherings. The exact order of their expression is understandably left undefined, so as to allow for the somewhat unpredictable flowing of the river of the Spirit in their midst. This “indefinableness” we should not tamper with, but some discussion of the “elements” seems to be in order.

We who have been gathering in the smaller settings have typically followed a developmental process of leadership devolution/evolution. Devolve, meaning the slow deterioration of a given “traditional” approach to leadership. Evolve, meaning the slow growth of a new style of leadership. We have gone from the more typical “Pastor leads the gathering,” to getting rid of the pastor’s title but still allowing/encouraging him to “facilitate,” which is just a softer and less control oriented function of the same general nature as the harder form of strict control. This too must go. Previously he gave “the order of service,” but now we just expect him to discern the Holy Spirit’s order of service and to direct the flock into the flow. In reality it’s just a softer form of the same old thing. The final stage of evolution appears to be acknowledging the Spirit’s basic pattern, as given to the apostles, yet allowing for His administration of those elements when we gather. In other words, we lose the strict and predictable “Opening song, or songs, morning introduction and announcements, more songs, a special song, one or two prophetic utterances, gentle wrap up of the song service, pastor’s greeting, pastor’s message, some form of response to the pastor’s message, a final song, encouragement to fellowship, go home.” During the evening service we might throw in a few more specials, a baptism or two, and maybe a few testimonies. Pretty predictable, tends towards stale, very “leadership” controlled.

So, if we are no longer to have “Pastors” giving us the order of service, and really not even “facilitating” the flow of the Spirit, then how on earth do we gather without it being some willy nilly undefined loving form of disorder? Good question.

And, if we begin with the assumption that no one other than the Lord Jesus Himself is to function as our “Pastor,” and if we believe He desires to determine the “order of service,” in our gatherings, can we look to the New Testament to give us any sense of “Basic Elements” that might characterize the gathering of the saints? To this we heartily affirm. The apostles do seem to have been given a variety of elements that characterized their gatherings, albeit no strict “order” of their expression was given, nor are we to assume each of the elements were always expressed in each time of gathering.

This paper will attempt to softly, rather than firmly, outline some of these elements. Softly, because we should not allow for any kind of rigid “order.” Softly, yet “really,” because we should not tolerate gatherings that fail to have the basic elements of the gatherings of the saints as expressed by the apostles. They were being given some form of “pattern,” just without rigidity or service order.

A Basic Outline of the elements of Gathering

How do we begin our times together? Well, it’s really pretty obvious. We come together and casually talk with one another. But from there it seems to have developed some form of pattern such as follows:

1 The Lord’s Supper -

1 Corinthians 11:20 Therefore when you come together in one place, it is not to eat the Lord’s Supper.

It was supposed to be the eating of the Lord’s Supper, but in reading the 1 Corinthian 11 passage it is evident it had become selfishness, gluttony, and drunkenness, in place of sharing, moderation, and flow of the Spirit’s love. It had become something other than gathering to eat the Lord’s Supper, which was the intended approach to initial gathering.

So, the rather predictable beginning of their gatherings was eating a meal together. The Lord’s Supper was a full meal shared by the entire gathered saints. We know it was far more than a dehydrated mini cracker and a sip of diluted grape juice. It was a shared meal.

Does this “have” to be done each time? Paul scolds them for messing it up and encourages those who can’t do it right to eat at home first, so “no” it doesn’t “have” to be done, but it appears it would normally be done unless you couldn’t do it right.

2 Prayers -

To establish His Headship -

While the apostles don’t explain exactly how they transitioned from the supper to the more “service oriented” gathering, if even such a phrase should be used to describe their gatherings, but it seems evident prayer was a HUGE element in their gatherings.

This only seems logical. If a defined man isn’t going to orchestrate and control the gathering, and clearly none did, and if they wanted Jesus to manifest Himself and guide their times together, then it only makes sense to move from dinner into prayer so as to begin to discern His direction for the gathering, and to allow Him to move in their midst.

I know we in house church typically begin with singing a half a dozen songs, as though the New Testament taught this was the beginning order of service, but there is no indication this was the case. Once again, this is a throw back to developed traditions, which traditions replaced the sovereign guidance of the Lord in the midst of His body. This isn’t to say that beginning with singing would be wrong, but better yet we ought to ask Him each time if this is how He desires to begin our times of more formal gathering.

It was clearly their desire to magnify and give room for the headship of Jesus in their midst.

Ephesians 1:22 And He put all things under His feet, and gave **Him to be head over all things to the church**, 23 which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

Ephesians 4:15 but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into **Him who is the head—Christ—** 16 **from whom the whole body**, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.

Ephesians 5: 23 For the husband is head of the wife, as also **Christ is head of the church**; and He is the Savior of the body.

Colossians 1:18 And **He is the head of the body, the church**, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence.

Colossians 2:19 and not **holding fast to the Head**, from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase that is from God.

Jesus is the builder of “His” Church.

Hebrews 3:1 Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our confession, Christ Jesus, 2 who was faithful to Him who appointed Him, as Moses also was faithful in all **His house**. 3 For this One has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses, inasmuch as He who **built** the house has more honor than the house. 4 For **every house is built by someone**, but He who built all things is God. 5 And Moses indeed was faithful in all His house as a servant, for a testimony of those things which would be spoken afterward, 6 but **Christ as a Son over His own house, whose house we are** if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm to the end.

Leaders are not the heads of the assembly. They are just brothers.

Matthew 23: 8 “But you, **do not be called ‘Rabbi’**; for One is your Teacher, the Christ, and **you are all brethren**. 9 “**Do not call anyone** on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. 10 “And do not be called teachers; for **One is your Teacher, the Christ**. 11 “But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. 12 “And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

Prayers for the apostolic workers -

Prayers were made for Paul and other apostolic Church workers -

Rom. 15:30 Now I beg you, brethren, through the Lord Jesus Christ, and through the love of the Spirit, that you **strive together with me in prayers** to God for me, ...

Acts 12:12 So, when he (Peter, who had been in prison) had considered this, he came to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose surname was Mark, where **many were gathered together praying**.

1 Thessalonians 5: 25 Brethren, **pray for us.**

2 Thessalonians 3:1 Finally, brethren, **pray for us**, that the word of the Lord may run swiftly and be glorified, just as it is with you, 2 and that we may be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men; for not all have faith.

Prayers in general and for earthly leaders -

The intro to 1 Timothy 2:1-8 is 1 Tim. 2:1-2 1 Therefore I exhort **first of all** that **supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men**, 2 for **kings and all who are in authority**, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence.

It seems likely the “first of all” may describe both order and importance, certainly importance, and maybe even order. Since we usually do the most important things first, so they don’t get passed over, it is likely his phrase implies both order and importance.

1 Thessalonians 5:17 **pray without ceasing...**

Not just casual prayers either. The apostles encouraged intense prayer.

Intense prayers -

1 Peter 4:7 But the end of all things is at hand; therefore **be serious and watchful in your prayers.**

Prayers for revelation and enlightenment -

Ephesians 1:15 Therefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, 16 do not cease to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers: 17 that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the **spirit of wisdom and revelation** in the knowledge of Him, 18 the eyes of your understanding being **enlightened**; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, 19 and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power...

Prayers for one another -

For the sick and those with needs -

James 5:13 Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms. 14 Is anyone among you **sick**? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. 15 **And the prayer of faith will save the sick**, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.

Public confession of trespasses -

James 5:16 **Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another,**

that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.

For transgressors -

1 John 5: 16 If anyone sees his brother sinning a sin which does not lead to death, **he will ask**, and He will give him life for those who commit sin not leading to death. There is sin leading to death. I do not say that he should pray about that.

3 Love and serve one another -

Romans 12:9 **Let love be without hypocrisy**. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good. 10 Be kindly affectionate to one another with **brotherly love**, in honor giving preference to one another; 11 not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, **serving the Lord**;

Romans 13:8 Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law.

Romans 13:9 ...“You shall **love your neighbor** as yourself.” 10 Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

Matthew 20:25 But Jesus called them to Himself and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. 26 “Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your **servant**. 27 “And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your **slave**— 28 “just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but **to serve**, and to give His life a ransom for many.”

Matthew 23:11 “But he who is greatest among you shall be your **servant**. 12 “And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

4 The moving of the Spirit of Jesus in their midst -

1 Corinthians 14:26 How is it then, brethren? Whenever you come together, **each of you** has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification.

1 Thessalonians 5: 20 Do not despise prophecies. 21 Test all things; hold fast what is good.

Both Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12 outline and specify the manifestations of the Spirit which are to take place in the gatherings of the saints.

5 Caring for the needy and the apostolic workers -

Tithing was not taught by the apostles because there was no temple, other than the believer’s themselves being the temple of the Holy Spirit. There was no separated out priesthood, other than the believer’s themselves making up the entire priesthood. They were taught to give themselves and all they had to the Lord and then to those whom He led them to give to.

2 Corinthians 8: 5 And not only as we had hoped, but **they first gave themselves to**

the Lord, and then to us by the will of God.

Hebrews 13:1Let brotherly love continue. 2Do not forget to entertain **strangers**, for by so doing some have unwittingly entertained angels. 3Remember the **prisoners** as if chained with them—those who are mistreated—since you yourselves are in the body also. (Today, worldwide, the Church is experiencing the persecution of the saints in many countries. Those in the unpersecuted areas have a clear biblical responsibility to care for and pray for our brothers and sisters who are being persecuted. Until every hungry, naked, and wounded believer has been fed, clothed, and healed of their wounds from persecution we would do well to suspend our church building projects - of which there is no biblical command for anyway - and care for our brothers and sisters who need us now.)

James 1:27Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit **orphans** and **widows** in their trouble...

1 Timothy 5:3Honor widows who are really widows.

Galatians 2:9and when James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that had been given to me, they gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. 10They desired only that we should **remember the poor**, the very thing which I also was eager to do.

2 Corinthians 8:1Moreover, brethren, we make known to you the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia: 2that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded in the riches of their **liberality**. 3For I bear witness that according to their ability, yes, and beyond their ability, they were freely willing, 4imploping us with much urgency that we would receive the gift and the fellowship of the **ministering to the saints**. (All of 2 Corinthians 9 discusses the call and blessing for giving to needy saints.)

James 2:14What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? 15If a brother or sister is **naked and destitute of daily food**, 16and one of you says to them, "Depart in peace, be warmed and filled," but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit?

1 John 3:16By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to **lay down our lives for the brethren**. 17But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his **brother in need**, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?

Philippians 4:10But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at last **your care for me** has flourished again; though you surely did care, but you lacked opportunity. 11Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: 12I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. 13I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. 14Nevertheless you have done well that you shared in my distress. 15Now you Philippians know also that in the beginning of the gospel, when I departed from Macedonia, **no church shared with me** concerning giving and receiving **but you only**. 16For even in Thessalonica **you sent aid** once and again for my necessities. 17Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that abounds to

your account. 18Indeed I have all and abound. I am full, having received from Epaphroditus the things sent from you, a sweet-smelling aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well pleasing to God. 19And my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus. 20Now to our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.

6 The Reading and Teaching of Scripture and doctrine, with exhortation to obedience -

1 Timothy 4:13Till I come, give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine.

Teaching -

1 John 2:27But **the anointing** which you have received from Him **abides in you**, and you do not need that anyone teach you; but as **the same anointing teaches you** concerning all things, and is true, and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you will abide in Him.

Acts 19:9But when some were hardened and did not believe, but spoke evil of the Way before the multitude, he departed from them and **withdrew the disciples**, reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus. 10And this continued for two years, so that **all who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus**, both Jews and Greeks.

1 Corinthians 4: 17For this reason I have sent Timothy to you, who is my beloved and faithful son in the Lord, who will **remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach everywhere in every church.**

1 Corinthians 14:19yet in the church I would rather speak five words with my understanding, **that I may teach others** also, than ten thousand words in a tongue.

1 Timothy 3:1This is a faithful saying: If a man desires the work of an overseer, he desires a good work. 2An overseer then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, **able to teach**;...

2 Timothy 2:2And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to **teach others also.**

2 Timothy 2:24And a servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, **able to teach**, patient,...

Hebrews 5:12For though by this time **you ought to be teachers**, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food.

Teaching and exhortation -

1 Timothy 4:11These things **command and teach.**

1 Timothy 6:1...**Teach and exhort** these things.

7 Psalms, hymns, spiritual songs, singing -

Ephesians 5: 18And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with

the Spirit, 19speaking to one another in **psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody** in your heart to the Lord,...

Hebrews 2: 11For both He who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified are all of one, for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren, 12saying:

“I will declare Your name to My brethren;

In the midst of the assembly I will sing praise to You.”

1 Corinthians 14:15What is the conclusion then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with the understanding. **I will sing with the spirit, and I will also sing with the understanding.**

Romans 15:9and that the Gentiles might glorify God for His mercy, as it is written:

“For this reason I will confess to You among the Gentiles, And **sing to Your name.**”

James 5:13Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? **Let him sing psalms.**

8 Outreach -

This is an interesting topic, since it plays so extensively in the modern Church. The modern Church gives titles and hierarchical authority to their leaders. The apostles did not teach so. The modern Church demands tithing from the saints. The apostles did not teach so. The modern Church builds elaborate and expensive church buildings. The apostles did not teach so. The modern Church pressures its saints to evangelize. The apostles did not teach so.

The early Church seems to have spontaneously shared the gospel out of their sheer joy at being saved and experiencing the living Jesus in their midst. The modern Church has often so quenched the believer's joy due to overbearing leadership, forced financial giving, and exhaustive church building and maintenance, and then wonders where their passion to evangelize has gone. In the modern Church the pastor is the Head of the Church, and in many cases is a wonderful person, but Jesus was to be the only Head, and is Himself far more wonderful and the giver of life and joy. When Church is not centrally focused on Jesus, when He is not the Head, and it is not exclusively His Church, then many things happen that weary the saints and kill their desire to spontaneously share the gospel. When Church returns to the simple gathering of the saints, to simply worship and honor the Lord, love the saints, and release His presence in their midst then slowly but surely the joy to share the gospel returns and the lost are saved.

The early Church workers did not pressure the saints to share, they couldn't stop them from doing so. This will return when Church returns to its apostolic patterns.

Romans 15:9and that the Gentiles might glorify God for His mercy, as it is written:

“For this reason **I will confess to You among the Gentiles,**

1 Peter 3:15But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always **be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope** that is in you, with meekness and fear;

Mark 8:38“**For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and**

sinful generation, of him the Son of Man also will be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels.”

Acts 6:7 Then **the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly** in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.

Acts 13:48 Now when the Gentiles heard this, **they were glad** and glorified the word of the Lord. And as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed. 49 And **the word of the Lord was being spread throughout all the region.**

These seem to be the basic elements for the gathering of the saints. I have not attempted to be exhaustive, but if the simple basics are regained we will have gone far towards seeing a restoration of the gathering the Lord had in mind for His Church.

I close with one Scripture that has been a guiding light to me throughout -

2 Corinthians 11:2 For I am jealous for you with godly jealousy. For I have betrothed you to **one husband**, that I may present you as **a chaste virgin to Christ**. 3 But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the ***simplicity that is in Christ***.

May God help us to keep it all about Jesus and keep it simple, uncluttered, and uncomplex.