



Part Four in the series: *"Towards a Christocentric Ecclesiology, or A Christ Centered Church"*

Intentional Gatherings

I love that word - ***“Intentional.”*** It has a ring to it that bears witness with something very deep within my spirit. It is a term that is moving among the body of those who have come out of the traditional Church, so it’s not unique with me, but it says something very important about the nature of a specific and identifiable Church for each one of us. For me there is a “knowing” that it is a God thing, a “deep that calls to deep” formation within me. There is a church, somewhere on this earth, that is more “my church,” than any other church on the planet. I’m called to it, called to bless it, and called to be known by it...”

In the term “my” I am not referencing “ownership,” but rather “community and relationship.”

Yet, for some of the many who have left the more traditional or institutionalized forms of the Church, the very notion of “Intentional Gathering” harkens back too closely to the institutional Church feel. It still feels too religious too controlled and “box like.” Unless it is a free flying bird, with no structure, no bounds, and no solid definitions, it isn’t the true Church for them. I don’t agree. I respect their perspective, and in a great many cases I see the genuineness of their spirituality and depth of relationship with Jesus that fuels their concern, but I don’t agree with their conclusions on this matter.

When I look into the New Testament, and what Jesus is saying and doing with especially Paul, I see small, intentional, tightly welded communities of Intentional Gatherings, in which we are called to tightly connect with one specific group of people more than any other group on earth. A structure defined by the Spirit, not self willed religious leaders. I don’t see legalistic, traditionalized, institutions of the development of some man’s significance, bounded by all kinds of legalistic rules, demands, and strait jacketed fears. They didn’t gather in Intentional Gatherings because someone told them the devil would destroy their lives, marriages, or families, if they also enjoyed the fellowship of other gatherings, or if they missed a few weeks of gathering, or they didn’t tithe, etc., etc.

In Paul’s theology there was clearly structure, and we need not fear such a concept. Sure, structure can lead to deadly institutions, but it doesn’t have to. I recently spoke with a very dear brother, who used to be on the staff of a very prominent Church in our city, and having left that he journeyed, for a season, into a “House Church,” and was once again burned by a controlling, hierarchically motivated “House Church Leader.” For him, House Church was no better than fully institutionalized Church. The answer was no identification of a regularly gathering welded covenant community, at any specific time or place. It just needed to happen by the Spirit’s leading, with those whom the Spirit had brought into a weldedness of relationship completely apart from any structured time or place. I respect his journey, but I disagree with his present conclusion.

Just because some small churches manifest the hierarchical control systems of self willed leaders

doesn't mean that a small church can't be governed by the headship of Jesus, and gathering before Him in a Spirit led agreement with Christ. The difference between these two concepts of leadership is the difference between day and night. There is absolutely no comparison. We are called to walk in deep spiritual agreement with Jesus, honoring His leadership in our midst, and not allowing any human leader to usurp His authority. When this happens awesome things happen among a people. Church becomes a marvelous thing, but admittedly we, who come forth from traditional institutions, have a long journey of growth before all of that comes out of us.

You and I haven't experienced church "Jesus styled," or "New Testament," until we've experienced it in the context of "Agreement in the Spirit," versus "Agreement with a hierarchical leader."

When I look at the Church I see five very significant chapters in the first letter to the Corinthians, that form the very nature of Intentional Gathering; that reveal the obviousness of Paul's developing a solid form that while not being rigid, still had clear elements of predictability that could be reproduced over and over again throughout the Roman empire, and indeed was...with each instance bearing a striking similarity of form and function.

1. 1 Corinthians 11 - A Meal Gathering.

The gathering of the Church had all the elements of "Family," about it. Fathers and mothers of the faith, gathered with sons and daughters, and brothers and sisters, in homes, to share a meal with, enjoy the fellowship of, and develop deep family ties and relationships. Eating together, at a specific time, at a specific location, was very important to the first Church. It is what was meant by "The breaking of bread together," which we see referenced in the book of Acts over and over again - Acts 2:42,46; 20:7,11; 27:35. The apostle Paul intentionally, at the obvious leading of the Spirit, developed this concept of the gathered Church. Eating and Church went hand in hand together.

Acts 2:42 And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Acts 2:46 And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts,

Acts 20:7 On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked (dialogued) with them, intending to depart on the next day, and he prolonged his speech until midnight.

Acts 20:11 And when Paul had gone up and had broken bread and eaten, he conversed with them a long while, until daybreak, and so departed.

Act 27:35 And when he had said these things, he took bread, and giving thanks to God in the presence of all he broke it and began to eat.

2. 1 Corinthians 12 - A Spiritualized Gathering.

The gifts of the Spirit, manifesting through waaaay more than just a few professional clergy, were evident in and through the entire gathered body, and they were taught to release those gifts, value those gifts, and honor The Gift Giver in them. The gathering was energized and given spiritual dynamics by these gifts of the Spirit, towards the knowing of Christ and the edification of the Church.

3. 1 Corinthians 12 - A Human Leadership in Agreement with the Headship of Christ type of Gathering.

Each believer, according to the book of Acts and Paul's writings, will know who their elder/leaders are, what biblical submission looks like, and how to relate to those leaders. Those who simply float among the body of Christ may find themselves missing the many benefits of loving care giving that leaders are called to provide. When we become tightly connected with the church we've been called to bond with, and relate closely with its leadership, bless that leadership in financial, material, and honoring ways, it releases that leadership to move into a form of care giving that would never take place with those who only marginally commit themselves to a group of people. There just isn't enough time in the day to spend with casual drifters. Care giving is such an intensive matter, that to enter into it with those who drift in and out is far too frustrating.

In all Paul's writings, and those of the book Acts, it is extremely clear that believers in the early church knew exactly who their leaders were, how to relate to them, and were in places where those leaders could predict finding and knowing them in community.

4. 1 Corinthians 13 - A Love Gathering.

Love was the welding force behind all they did. It was their love for Jesus, and His love in and through them, that welded them together. It built literal communities of love. Rather than fear they would become some institutionalized religious synagogue, they knew, if they maintained their commitment to His dynamic love in their midst, that it would always be about Him, to Him, through Him, and In Him that they were gathering. His love had so profoundly touched their lives that they wanted to be near people who had experienced and were experiencing similar touches. It was their joy to express this love, in regular gatherings, identifiable gatherings, of love welded intentional relationships. It fed the poor, healed the sick, cared for the widows and orphans, and comforted the downcast among them.

5. 1 Corinthians 14 - A Participatory Gathering.

It is sooo obvious they developed an intentional and regular gathering of believers, by just this passage. This is more than just a "happenstance" sort of thing. Paul's entire emphasis in this chapter, manifests a regular, predictable, identifiable, gathering, at a specific place, where believers and unbelievers knew its location, and came together to jointly participate in the manifestation of the Spirit. It is very obvious, in his wording, that this had a predictable time and place of meeting. "All" the gathered body participated, as is seen by Paul's many uses of the word "All" in this chapter. There was no sitting in a cold pew, staring at the back of a head in front of you, and watching a few clerical professionals perform up front. Everyone could contribute. Everyone's participation was anticipated, desired, and in fact - essential, if true edification of the body was to take place. His wording more than implies that this group of people knew each other, regularly gathered with each other, struggled to grasp a healthy gathering concept, and were committed to working through issues that related to them and their specific gathering. They were tight knit, hung in there through tough times, and were apparently bonded enough to seek out Paul's council as to how they could work through the specific challenges their specific church was facing.

*1 Corinthians 14:5 Now I want you **all** to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up.*

*1 Corinthians 14:23 If, therefore, the whole church comes together and **all** speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your minds? 24 But if **all** prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by **all**,*

*1 Corinthians 14:26 What then, brothers? When you come together, **each one** has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let **all** things be done for building up.*

*1 Corinthians 14:31 For you can **all** prophesy **one by one**, so that **all** may learn and **all** be encouraged,*

6. 1 Corinthians 16 - A specifically located Gathering.

In verse 19 Paul references the Church that met regularly in Aquila and Prisca's home. It is evident by his naming certain individuals, who were connected with certain homes, that while those brethren undoubtedly gathered with other believers in other places, these specific and identifiable places represented the "ONE" location for "THEIR" Church. In other words, they "knew" where their Church was. It was "their specific identifiable Church," whereas other gatherings of believers, though wonderful and meaningful, were not "their Church." Paul seemed to teach these believers to identify with one specific group of people, go deep in relationship with them, as well as to enjoy other believers in other places too.

In our day, the notion of a free floating, unidentifiable place as "my Church," appears to me to fly in the face of the clear identifyings I see in Paul's description.

1 Corinthians 16:15 Now I urge you, brothers--you know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and that they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints--

*1 Corinthians 16:19 The **churches** of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house, send you hearty greetings in the Lord.*

Notice the clearly identifiable gatherings within just the one city of Corinth, or in the following examples, the one city of Rome. These "appear" to be composed of those who saw themselves as more connected with a specific group of people than any other group anywhere else in the empire.

Romans 16:3 Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus,... 5 Greet also the church in their house.

Romans 16:14 Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers who are with them.

Romans 16:15 Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them.

Romans 16:16 Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you. (Note in Paul's choice of words, when he is addressing various churches in Rome, that all the specifically identifiable "churches - plural" in other places, send their greetings along to these specific churches. If the church is not clearly identifiable, and everyone floats equally among many different gatherings, then such wording would have no meaning. In such a case he would have been better off saying something like "the church universal, in the area I'm currently

writing, sends greetings to the church universal in Rome...,” but he doesn’t say this. He is obviously seeing something far more welded, consistent, predictable, and formed than this.

It was a specifically identified local expression of the welded covenant community of intentionally gathering believers, that people could find, gather with, and know, if they were of a mind to in Ephesus (Acts 18:18,19),

Act 18:18 After this, Paul stayed many days longer and then took leave of the brothers and set sail for Syria, and with him Priscilla and Aquila. At Cenchreae he had cut his hair, for he was under a vow. 19 And they came to Ephesus, and he left them there, but he himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews.

And they greeted this Church in Corinth. This same couple had previously lived in Corinth, and very likely had gathered the Church in their home there as well, which we see referenced to in Acts 18:1-3.

Act 18:1 After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. 2 And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. And he went to see them, 3 and because he was of the same trade he stayed with them and worked, for they were tentmakers by trade.

So, Aquila and Priscilla’s home could regularly be counted upon to be a dwelling place of the Church local. And, because Paul is writing to some clearly identifiable place in Corinth, we are undoubtedly on solid ground to say that what they had learned with Aquila and Priscilla, in terms of gathering in the home, they were still walking in. Paul sent his letter to a house Church in Corinth and it was circulated among the other identifiable house Churches there.

All of Paul’s letters were sent “somewhere,” and that somewhere was a specific intentionally gathering fellowship of believers, in a place where he knew he could send his letter with the anticipation that those regularly gathering would have an opportunity to hear the things he had penned by the Spirit for their edification.

He raised up specific elders to oversee specific gatherings of believers in each city he visited, and where he knew the Church was regularly gathering. The structure that elders and deacons provided, to intentional leadership, of a grace oriented nature, is clearly evident. These elders knew where to find the believers they were to lead, guide, and care for. Without some form of structure, they would have been hopelessly scattered about the region, with no clear place to meet and be built up by the teaching and oversight these leaders were to bring.

Please don’t hear me saying a given local fellowship of believers must always meet in the same home, or the same beach location, or the same location in a park, etc., every week, but it is evident that there was enough structure among them that they were clearly identifiable, scheduled, and findable. People knew where they were, and they met regularly enough to manifest a predictable element of localized gathering. At times they undoubtedly moved from house to house, or wooded glen to wooded glen, but they were known, and their gatherings were regular, and people knew where to find them.

Those who opt for a free floating - “The church is defined for me by any group of believers I happen to be with at the time, in which we let Jesus lead our time together,” fails the test of New Testament example. It leaves the door open for multitudes of failures of body accountability, remaining shallow in relationship and thus missing the treasures that can only come by being “known” deeply and intimately by others. When we do not identify one specific group of believers as “our church”

we risk an independent spirit that may well serve our flesh's desire to not be known or held accountable. We run the risk of missing the spiritual input that may only come by being well known, tightly bonded with, and deeply connected in spirit with a group of people we have weathered storms, enjoyed victories with, and learned to plumb the depths of Christ with.

While the most mature among us may avoid some of the snares that a free floating concept of church may allow for, those who are less mature are far more likely to hide in such a concept and miss the benefits of admonishing, being known, accountability, responsibility to edify others, and the many "one anothers" of scripture. Most of which we are far less likely to enter into until we have committed ourselves to an identifiable group of people for the long haul.

Do we favor deep relationships beyond that which we identify as "our church?" Of course! But let's be clear...they are not "our church," they other groups of believers whom we enjoy Jesus with. They are those with whom we share our journey, but not in the same degree of commitment that we do with "our church."

I know this will feel too restrictive to some, and thus feel legalistic, but the issue of this principle is not a "have to" of gathering, but the joy of experiencing that which will only manifest in such tightly welded communities. It's not a matter of "I have to be faithful to one specific church," but rather an awareness that what Jesus has called us to has the potential of blessing us beyond any other form of free floating approach to church.

As we draw this study to a close, please note the many times Paul refers to "Churches - plural," as well as references to what was obviously a single house church, as if to communicate they were specific, in identifiable locations, met predictably, were tightly bonded groups that saw themselves locally more committed to and involved with one specific church than any other in their area or the empire. When Paul could have easily referenced the concept of a "Church universal," or a generalized Church in a region, he carefully references "Churches - plural, and Church - singular," to reveal the specific nature of individual Churches.

I add these here, for more than anything, to help you feel the weight of repetition of his references to specific, identifiable groups which regularly gathered together and considered themselves a Church. He references 31 examples of such identification:

Acts 15:41 And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

Acts 16:5 So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily.

Romans 16:4 who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks but all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks as well.

Romans 16:5 Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in Asia.

Romans 16:16 Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you.

1 Corinthians 4:17 That is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church.

1 Corinthians 5:12 For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge?

1 Corinthians 7:17 Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches.

1 Corinthians 11:16 If anyone is inclined to be contentious, we have no such practice, nor do the churches of God.

1 Corinthians 11:18 For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part,

1 Corinthians 11:22 What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not.

1 Corinthians 14:4 The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church.

1 Corinthians 14:5 Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up.

1 Corinthians 14:12 So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church.

1 Corinthians 14:33 For God is not a God of confusion but of peace. As in all the churches of the saints,

1 Corinthians 14:34 the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says.

1 Corinthians 16:1 Now concerning the collection for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do.

1 Corinthians 16:19 The churches of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house, send you hearty greetings in the Lord.

2 Corinthians 8:1 We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia,

2 Corinthians 8:18 With him we are sending the brother who is famous among all the churches for his preaching of the gospel.

2 Corinthians 8:19 And not only that, but he has been appointed by the churches to travel with us as we carry out this act of grace that is being ministered by us, for the glory of the Lord himself and to show our good will.

2 Corinthians 8:23 As for Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker for your benefit. And as for our brothers, they are messengers of the churches, the glory of Christ.

2 Corinthians 8:24 So give proof before the churches of your love and of our boasting about you to these men.

2 Corinthians 11:8 I robbed other churches by accepting support from them in order to serve you.

2 Corinthians 11:28 And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.

2 Corinthians 12:13 For in what were you less favored than the rest of the churches, except that I myself did not burden you? Forgive me this wrong!

Galatians 1:2 and all the brothers who are with me, To the churches of Galatia:

Galatians 1:22 And I was still unknown in person to the churches of Judea that are in Christ.

Colossians 4:15 Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house.

1 Thessalonians 2:14 For you, brothers, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea. For you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews,

Philemon 1:2 and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house:

In a day, where millions of believers are coming out of hierarchically defined institutions of religious practice, and into small and simple gatherings of believers, we need not cast off all form and identity, so as to avoid institutionalization, but we certainly do want to avoid institutionalization.

May God help us to sort through these issues. It matters not “where” we gather. We refer to it as “The House Church,” but not because it must be, or was, confined to homes, but certainly a home is a logical place of gathering, and was obviously the preferred place of gathering for the first believers, because the apostles taught them to eat together like a family, and where better to do that than in a home, where all the cooking apparatus would be? As families gather in homes, so the family of God most regularly gathered in the home.

We don’t need to be afraid of God’s development of a “House Church Movement.” But, we do need to be concerned that man doesn’t take a hold of it, and make it become his movement, his thing, his definition of significance, control, and power over. All previous moves of God have always devolved into man centered developments of human significance, and they have ALWAYS ended up ugly, and about everything but Jesus. Certainly those who resist the identifiable intentional gathering approach, of “House Church,” are doing so with the pure motive of avoiding this sad development of man centeredness and religious traditions, but I don’t believe we need to throw the baby out with the bath water. What we need to do is stick close to the pattern the apostles defined, the traditions they established, the foundations they laid in Christ. If we do this we will see developed something that is all about Jesus, and led by Him personally.

These are great days to be alive, and Jesus is clearly gathering His Church back to Himself. As God raises up leaders, writers, teachers and planters, to refound and reform His Church on Himself, we can move safely and joyfully towards Intentional Gatherings of welded covenant communities of believers.