



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

Participatory Gatherings Facilitating a 1 Corinthians 14 styled Gathering

Here are some principles that can help guide those who are working hard at developing a strong and healthy approach to small and participatory type gatherings. While there are many ways of viewing this area, those mentioned here are a good beginning.

Listen carefully to Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 3 -

1Corinthians 3:9 For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.¹⁰ According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. ¹¹ For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

1. Fellow workers.

Leaders are workers, not bosses, not "in charge," and not domineering. They are to be the gentle worker types, Paul references in 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12; Matthew 20:25-28.

In all of Paul's teaching on the role of leadership, he does not recognize a single person deciding how each gathering will go. I know we have grown up with this approach, but if you will carefully look at all he wrote you will recognize that the approach of control of each gathering is absent in his description of the role of leadership. Paul addresses his teaching to the whole body, rather than to individual leaders.

While he does recognize authority in the gatherings, it is a spiritual authority, based in an accurate reflection of the Word of the Lord, rather than being based on a position, a title, or office. In this sense, we would certainly expect those leading us to more regularly than others, manifest true spiritual "Word based" authority in the gatherings, but we should be open to it also manifesting among any in the body.

Therefore, when we gather I often remind the people, "I'm not in charge here...Jesus is. If He speaks to anyone gathered, in a way that you are as certain as you can be that it is Him, then we encourage you to speak that forth, and let His Spirit guide our time together." Often the theme of the time together will originate with the overseer or teaching leader, but not always.

2. According to Grace.

Allow room for the grace of God, rather than a "performance oriented atmosphere."

If people feel forced to share it will often cause them to withdraw. For this reason the leader

types need to encourage group participation, but always be ready with something fresh from the Lord, in case it takes those gathering some time to jump in.

3. People = The Church.

People are the buildings God is most interested in. The building or location is secondary, thus it might be in a “Church building,” or it might be a living room, restaurant, beach, office, etc. The focus is to be on “people” not location.

As such, the way to think about each gathering, is to recognize that Jesus is seeking to add spiritual rooms in their hearts, filled with wisdom and grace. They are what He is building.

4. Permanent Apostolic Foundations.

Paul laid a foundation, along with the 12 apostles of Christ, and we believe that foundation covers how the Church is to gather, and what those gatherings are to look like. Certain principles seem to be timeless in nature, thus we urge the body towards honoring those original foundations, not assuming that foundation was to be added on to, changed, or discarded.

5. Careful building on the Foundation.

We, as we develop His Church, add on top of what the apostles laid, thus the developing house of God’s people is always to reflect the original foundation, and not take on an appearance that dismisses the first foundational principles of gathering. We “take care” how we build on it!

For this reason, since they founded it on Christ, each time of gathering should look to Jesus to actively reveal and lead the time together. The people should have encountered the living Christ in each time of gathering.

6. The Foundation is a Person.

Thus whatever the Church develops into, it needs to be so thoroughly “about Jesus Christ,” that no one ever wonders what we are gathering to achieve. We are gathering to see Him, hear Him, and come to know Him, because He is the foundation of all we are about.

When Paul tells us “no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ,” we believe he meant “no one should.” Unfortunately church history is too often a story of all kinds of other foundations that distracted the people from knowing and loving Jesus. We want to avoid such deviations and distractions. We gather to Him, for Him, in Him, and by Him.

Paul gives us some of the “Foundation” elements he built upon Christ, in 1 Corinthians 14 -

Please note, at the outset, that this letter was written “To the Saints in Christ Jesus” in Corinth (1 Cor. 1:2), rather than to an individual leader. The principles we will consider here are given to the entire body to administrate, rather than to one individual who had control of the gatherings. This does not dismiss the role of leadership, but certainly redefines it.

1. Love, vs 1. Love must be the guiding principle in all of our gatherings, otherwise we would and offend the body, in the very place we were to be building them up.

True leadership is always manifested by the traits of gentle encouragement, graciousness,

patience, care, example, wisdom, and self sacrificing service.

2. Desire for the manifestation of spiritual gifts, vs 1 (see also 1 Cor. 12, and Romans 1:11,12)

Everyone can enter into the experience of releasing spiritual gifts among those gathered. It is the joy of our spirituality to do so.

3. Encourage the prophetic, because it focuses on revealing Jesus, vs 1

Prophecy is most pre-eminently for the purpose of edification, exhortation, and comfort, rather than for specific direction for individuals, indirect confrontation, or harsh reprisals.

This is not to say that specific direction will never be given in the gathering, but it will not be the norm. Such direction must be approached with great caution and discernment, lest the flock be led astray or the prophetic be endangered from abuse and error.

Most of us have grown up in a “Thus saith the Lord...” (First person) approach to prophecy, and while we would be incorrect to say that such an approach should never be used, we have found that the less direct form (Second person) is a better and less pride oriented approach. Rather than declaring “Thus saith the Lord, I am calling you to...,” we see the approach of “I’m hearing the Lord say He is calling us to...”

4. Not just through one primary person, but potentially through each of those gathered together, remembering the 1 Cor. 3 principles, so that what we can anticipate in each one sharing is a manifestation of Jesus revealing Himself through His many membered body. The entire chapter addresses this potential.

See especially “all” and “each one,” “each of them,” “you - plural” and “any,” or “another” in verses 5, 23-32 (Two or three prophets speak, then the others - *plural participation*, weigh what has been said, and then more prophets can speak up.)

Paul’s words “Define Church,” in these verses, more than just cell groups. Often the Church has defined the gathering of the saints as primarily a “low participation” environment, other than perhaps a special song, maybe one or two prophecies, a few musicians, someone giving the announcements, someone taking up the offering, Sunday school teachers, etc., but as for the actual sharing of the revelation of Jesus Christ, this has been primarily reserved for the professionals only. What we hear the Lord calling for is a far broader involvement of the body in gathered Church life, in which the message of the Living Word (The Lord Jesus) is expressed through the written Word, in the mouths of His saints gathered together to hear, see, know, and reveal Him.

We are not saying there is no place for monologue preaching/teaching, but we hear Him calling the body to move towards a far greater participation in the revelation of Jesus to His Church.

Notice, under this principle, the following passages: Ephesians 4:15-17; 1 Peter 4:10,11; Hebrews 5:12.

What you will experience is the Lord Jesus touching one person after another, with insights from life and scripture, and direct spiritual impressions from His mind. One person will share, which will trigger another person to hear something in Christ, which will lead to someone else hearing

the next element of His heart, and on will the time together go.

Expect the Lord to bring forward one to three distinct themes in your times of gathering, and then watch Him expand and develop those themes. By the time you are ready to leave you will easily be able to sum up those themes, and what God communicated.

5. An attitude of “I want to participate in a revealing of Christ,” rather than, I want to be showcased and make the gathering be about me, or my ideas of things, or my problems, or my wants, etc. Vss 3

Let me suggest a gentle approach to guiding people, who are getting off course, or speaking those things that are either in error, or too controversial, or argumentative, back into the flow of the Spirit. I will listen to what they are saying, and then I wait until I hear something that is true, accurate, or edifying in what they have said, and when they pause I will jump in, seize on their good comment, tie it back into what the Spirit was saying, and move the flow forward. I do this without hurting their feelings, or causing them to “lose face” before the others. Generally they have no idea what I did. They feel affirmed and avoid being embarrassed in front of others. For me to directly confront them in front of others, it would have to be based on them having said or done something that everyone gathering would have recognized as very hurtful and very wrong, and were needing someone to bring a correction to it.

6. An attitude of “I want my presence to bring a benefit to the others,” rather than simply coming to receive. Vss 4,5,6,12,17,26

The more the people are encouraged to think this way about their coming, the higher your times will rise in the Spirit, and great growth will take place in their lives.

7. Recognize that the primary purpose of the formal gathering time is to reveal Jesus, not just fellowship, or even just to pray, but rather to trust the Lord to reveal Himself, His ways, His truths, and His heart, to those gathered. Vss 6,19,26

If you feel led to gather just for prayer, this is a good thing, but it should be a stated intention, rather than being the norm. Often, the sharing will be done in a prayerful manner, never really leaving the spirit of prayer.

If you will pay attention to the days prior to your gathering, you will discover the Lord showing you things in your life and in His Word, that you can bring to the gathering to edify the saints with what He has revealed to you of Himself in the preceding week.

8. Seek to be clear in what you are presenting. Work at forming your thoughts in your mind before sharing with the fellowship. This should only take you a moment, but it is an important step towards edifying communication. Vss 7-9
9. Allow for and encourage spontaneous short songs, given by the Spirit, to encourage or to magnify a teaching He is bringing forth. Vss 15,26; Ephesians 5:19
- 10 Don't be afraid to bring an unbeliever to such a gathering. If the Spirit of God moves, He may just reveal the nature of the guest's need, and how Jesus is the answer to his life need. Vss 23-25
- 11 Recognize that no one person has it all. We need each one to listen with his/her spirit, and discover what it is that Jesus is trying to say. Vss 27-33

This is true for even the very youngest among you.

- 12 I believe Paul's words, regarding the verbal participation of women, was based in current cultural issues of the day, and ancient but not biblical customs, and as time went by ceased to be a factor for the Church. Vss 34,35

However, the bible is abundantly clear that a married woman is to deeply respect her husband's headship oversight in her life, and as such, she honors the degree and manner of participation that they have previously settled upon to be appropriate for her function among the body.

While most of us have grown up in largely "non participatory" gatherings, or "low participation," we are learning the dynamic potential for a fully engaged body. Those we gather with, who have learned to experience the coming together of the Church, in the ways mentioned above, will tell you they can't imagine returning to an environment where they sit passively and listen, with no opportunity to share the things they are seeing in Christ.

We encourage the body of Christ to redefine leadership, gathering, and the nature of Jesus' Church. You will be glad you did!