



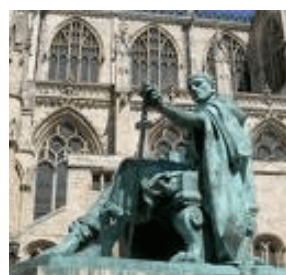
Part Nine in the series: *"Towards a Christocentric Ecclesiology, or A Christ Centered Church"*

Is Church a Programmed Meeting?

I have been involved with the Church for over 45 years, and in all those years one of the central elements of Church has been THE MEETING.

Look familiar? The Sunday...go to meeting...

But, is the Church really about "meetings," or about fluid organic relationship in our gatherings?



Maybe being 55 now (a little younger than that gentleman in the front row with gray hair), and somewhat wearying of the meeting nature Church has taken on (I think his eyes are closed...), I'm inclined to take a second look at this, or perhaps it is the Lord tugging at my heart because of the many changes He is bringing to the Church in these days, but I'm seeing new things for my life, as relates to how we "DO" Church, and I'm fascinated to discover that I'm not alone in this. Many are awakening (sir, we need you to wake up now...it's time to collect the Lord's tithes and offerings...thank you!) to the need for many changes.

Certainly Church history, from the time of Constantine (AD 325) forward, has taught us that Church is defined by some form of "special religious meeting." It means going to a "place" and engaging in various defined religious practices, rituals, or liturgy. I suppose, as activities go, many of these religious practices are not so bad, in and of themselves, but after awhile they beg the question... "Is Church really primarily about meetings?" Mind you, I'm not opposing "meetings," I'm opposing a nearly singular definition of "Church" as being a meeting.



For the first 40 years of my involvement I found myself, by virtue of cultural adaptation and conditioning, connected to the Institutional Church (IC), and as such, the IC has always defined Church as a "meeting." This is just the way we "do" Church. Church is a "doing" thing, much more than a "being" thing. It is much more about a "place" than being a "people."

If we, as some, define Church as essentially being a "meeting," then of course there are

logically no real limits on the size of those meetings, since a meeting can take place with a small number or a mega number. And, if we buy into the effects of the Industrial Revolution, in which we learn to see the Church as a business corporation, then of course, the larger the corporation the more successful it obviously is. Since success is the highest goal of any corporation, the mega Church exceeds in value the little house gathering approach by a long shot. Fortunately the Lord is speaking clearly in these days, and challenging the outcomes of the industrial revolution as it relates to the Church, and creating His own revolution in His Church.

Meetings in the IC have been seen as things that, due to the necessity of keeping them on track, (and not digressing into a million fragmented purposes, dictated by the multitudes gathering, with their sundry ideas for how things might go in those meetings), requires we have those who are “in charge” of these gatherings. Those in charge have come to be known as “Senior Pastors,” not so much by New Testament definition or designation, but more as the obvious corollary to the worldly business corporation model’s CEO. If Church is “essentially” a Meeting, they truly need CEOs to keep them on track and accomplishing the stated goals, otherwise the masses will ruin the meetings by their many ideas of how things might go in those meetings.



But, why define Church as essentially a meeting in the first place? If we don’t, then out goes the “bigger is better” notion, and out goes the necessity for the CEO/Senior Pastor. We no longer need someone “in charge,” as much as we need an agreement for how the gathering will be managed.



If we settle that Jesus is well able to manage the small gatherings (gathering being used instead of the term “meeting”) then we learn to look to Him to guide our times together. Thus, we look to each member of the gathering to be in touch with the Lord, and aware of their privilege and responsibility to be led by Him at all times, and perhaps especially in those times we gather. We lean towards small gatherings so that each member of the body has the opportunity to express that aspect of the life of Christ they are seeing, and thus edify the body.

But, let’s take it a step further and ask the question, if we move from the more “formal” meeting to a small Spirit led gathering, and from human CEOs to Jesus’ headship and leadership in those gatherings, why do we gather at all? How often should we gather? What does gathering look like in the New Testament? Is it a “duty” or a privilege? Does it require consistent regularity and at a consistent location? In case, at this point, you’re fearful I’m about to throw out regular gatherings, don’t worry I’m not...

These are questions that I think are worthy of a second look, because the cultural conditioning the Church has brought to believers is so pervasive it is likely we have really very little idea of what was in Jesus’ mind for creating His Church, and are more inclined to just “do what we do,” because that’s “what we’ve always done.” Kind of a silly approach to something so significant as Church, but then this is the modus operandi for most of what we “do” as humans. We just do what we’ve been told is “the thing to do.”

When it comes to Church, perhaps it deserves a bit deeper of a look at its nature, and then

see if the “doing” we’ve been doing is really at the heart of the matter of what Church is all about.

We are told by Paul that the Church was even in the Old Testament:

Acts 7:37 This is that Moses, who said unto the children of Israel, A prophet shall God raise up unto you from among your brethren, like unto me. 38 This is he that was in the **church in the wilderness** with the angel that spake to him in the Mount Sinai, and with our fathers: who received living oracles to give unto us: 39 to whom our fathers would not be obedient, but thrust him from them, and turned back in their hearts unto Egypt, 40 saying unto Aaron, Make us gods that shall go before us: for as for this Moses, who led us forth out of the land of Egypt, we know not what is become of him. 41 And they made a calf in those days, and brought a sacrifice unto the idol, and rejoiced in the works of their hands.

It’s not a new invention of the New Testament, though it does take on a different form and function in the New.

Was the Church in the wilderness a meeting? Nope, certainly not entirely! It was a nation, composed of people in tight relationships with one another. They were the “Ekklesia” - the ones gathered by God, called out of the nations, to become a nation unto God. They did meet with God, at various times and for various feasts, but way beyond being defined by meetings they were defined by being “His people.” The very same connotation carries over into the New Testament. We are less defined by meetings and far more defined by being a people, called out of the world, to the Lord.

So where did the notion of “Church equals a meeting,” come from? As near as we can tell it originated during the time of Israel’s captivity in Babylon. It is there they developed an alternative to the temple, in the form of a Synagogue. Such Synagogues were developed to maintain a cohesive tradition of beliefs for who they were as a people unto their God. One primary person ordered the service, defined the ritual, and controlled the outcomes. It met in a building of a religious nature, and all was very predictable. There is certainly a valid logic to it, and I find no great fault in some elements of this practice, but “Was it mandated and canonized by God.” The answer to this appears to be “No.”



I wouldn’t question that Jesus and His disciples, or even Paul the apostle, frequented these places, but it appears as though it was far less as a stamp of approval on their form of gathering, and more a place to find people to communicate the truths of the kingdom, to those who needed to “repent, for the kingdom of Heaven was at hand,” sort of thing.



Now, just saying that God didn’t call for it or require it doesn’t make it wrong, but neither does it mean that it is a sacred thing just because Israel in captivity developed it. If anything we might choose to be a bit suspicious of its development, but keeping that suspicion under control so as not to make a mountain out of a mole hill. Let’s just say that there is no New Testament evidence that God mandated the notion of His New Testament Church be held within the confines of the notion of a “religious meeting.” It remains a “people” first, in

close relationships, and very secondarily is anything said about how this people go to meetings. We're not saying that meetings are inherently bad, or that the early Church didn't have meetings. Just that "meetings" are not essential to the concept of being the Church.

We are not told anywhere in the NT that they were required to meet at Solomon's porch, which they did until 70 AD, when Titus destroyed Jerusalem and forced the Church into all the nations. We're just told that's what they did.

We are not told anywhere in the NT that they were required to meet in House settings, but that it is just what they did. There is a family logic to this setting, but the emphasis is "family relationships," not formal religious meetings.

Why did they gather anyway? To fulfill some divinely imposed quota for religious meetings, as if meetings were somehow a "duty" of genuine believers? Not so! We see nothing of this.

The use of the following verse, to force this sort of approach, has no NT support:

Heb 10:25 Let us not give up **meeting** together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

From the Greek and English Lexicon of the NT we read the following, as regards this word "meeting":

episunagwghē, h' *f*: episunagogeī (derivative of **episunagomai** 'to gather at,' 15.124) the gathering together of a group (in the active rather than in the passive sense of **episunagwghē**, 15.126) - 'gathering, assembling.' **mh; egkatalaiponte" thn episunagwghn eautwn, kaqw;" epho" tisin** 'do not neglect your assembling as some are doing' He 10.25.¹

1 Louw, Johannes P. and Nida, Eugene A., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament based on Semantic Domains*, (New York: United Bible Societies) 1988, 1989.

In other words the meaning of this word "meeting," is not "meeting," in some formal sort of religious business sense, but simply means to "to gather at some place." That "place" is undefined.

For too long believers have been taught that unless they had some form of "formal super structured and programmed meeting" of the Church they were failing this verse. This is not what this verse is saying. It is simply telling us, that as believers, we need to be near one another, and that it is very spiritually unhealthy for us to avoid getting together with other believers.

It isn't telling us we are called to formal preprogrammed meetings, but rather that we are to meet/gather/spend time with/get together with other believers at some place on the planet where we can allow the living dynamics of the presence of Jesus to touch each other's lives. It doesn't tell us it always has to be at one specific place, or only with one specific group, etc. It just tells us gathering is a good thing.

The entire notion of a formal, regulated, preprogrammed, and gathering is no where mandated in the NT. We are simply told they gathered, not that they were required by the apostles to do it in some regulated formula. We aren't even told that they always met on any specific day or that they met every week. In some cases they met daily (Acts 2:46) in

the porch area of the Temple. In other cases they met daily (Acts 5:41) in homes. There is no indication this “daily” element continued in the Church, as the Church moved beyond the confines of Jerusalem. The bible is wonderfully silent as to the day they gathered or if it was weekly, monthly, etc. We just know believers got together, and in those times together they experienced the shared life of Christ.

So what is the nature of the Church, if it isn’t essentially a programmed meeting?

It is a relational community, created for fellowship with Jesus, and Christ in one another. It can take place anywhere and anytime believers desire to gather. They are still the Church, even if they don’t gather, because membership in the Church is not based on attending meetings, but is based on receiving the finished work of Christ and having become members of the household of faith. We gather because we desire to experience the reality of Christ in one another, and the various ways He chooses to manifest Himself through the life of the body, not because we owe God a weekly meeting. If we gather in a weekly meeting it should be because we believe He is leading us to, not just because “everybody else does it...”

If two or three or more get together in a home, an office, a park, or a restaurant, it matters little where, just that we enjoy getting together to express our shared life in Christ. It is about relationship, not having meetings. We get together with other believers because we love them and the Jesus in them. We gather because of love, not obligation. Whenever the “obligation” element creeps into the believer’s life, as relates to gathering, in that place the life of Christ is being squeezed out and legalism is beginning to take over. This is where rituals and traditions of men begin to form, and in time they tend to nullify the Word of God. For this reason, even if a group of believers has regularly been gathering on a set day and time each week, it is a good idea to change the day and time for a season just to be certain they aren’t addicted to a particular style of gathering or the duty of doing so. If the goal of our times together is sharing the life of Christ, and if we recognize meaningless traditions can get in the way of that, then from time to time it is not a bad idea to completely change the manner in which we gather, so that we remember “why” we are gathering, and thus avoid slipping into a rut.

It is too easy for us to slip into a dead pattern of gathering in a particular manner. We can say we aren’t institutionalized any longer, but if the dynamic of our times with believers always takes the same basic approach then we’re likely still institutionalized but just in new and different ways from when we were in the IC.

Now I know some will raise the objection, “But, don’t New Testament gatherings have to have elders/shepherds present, to keep them safe and to avoid heresies, and to teach them the Word and ways of God?” The answer to this is both “yes,” and “no.” There is nothing in the New Testament that indicates all gatherings must always have an elder present to legitimize that gathering, or keep it safe. Does this mean elders are not valuable and important for the body? Certainly not! Elders have a role in the body, but that role is not control, over administration, or program establishment. Their role is simply defined by the two terms they are given - Bishop (overseer), and Elder (older wise one).

Paul tells us, in Acts 14, that the Church, in every locale, should have resident elders, to help give care and oversight to the Church:

Acts 14:21 When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, 22 strengthening the souls of the

disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. 23 And when **they had appointed elders for them in every church**, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

From this we are not certain this refers to an elder for every single house gathering of the Church, or, as Paul seems to allude, elders for every Church in the city. Paul seems far more to teach of the “Church in the city,” rather than a “Church in a building, or even a home.”

Notice how this looks in Acts 20:

Acts 20:17 Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him.

It is obvious from Acts 20:20 that Ephesus had “A Church” comprised of many house fellowships:

Act 20:20 how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house,...

When the Church ceases to partake of systems religion and institutionalization, then it will look to the elders in the city, who move among the various home and public fellowships (coffee houses, offices, parks, beaches, etc.). Those elders will form an oversight of collegiate relationship among themselves, for those they oversee in the entire city. Some gatherings will have an elder present, and some won't. Some regularly will, and others regularly won't. The elders will be continually moving among the gatherings, not controlling them, but providing teaching, wisdom, oversight, care, and example. This will look very different, but it will be very healthy, because it will cause each gathering of the saints to learn to look to Jesus for gathering leadership, rather than to some controlling human leader.

When Paul wrote to the believers in 1 Corinthians 14, and addressed the nature of their gatherings, there is nothing in this chapter that approaches any kind of requirement for regularity or formality. Believers, just because they have an active faith in a living Jesus, when they gather with other believers, will share the life of Christ that is at work within them, when they get together with other believers. In this sense, protocols begin to be necessary so the dynamics of His life can be expressed without someone dominating the time together or without someone being allowed to promote false teachings or error. We “share” together the life of Jesus. We learn that we each can express dimensions of Jesus to one another when we are with other believers. Our contributions are significant because they represent the supernatural involvement of a living Jesus with the body.

An approach to gathering that is “meeting” in nature will have the tendency to squeeze the life of Christ out of those times, and settle into ritualized patterns that slowly but surely lose the life they once expressed. We find out if we are truly experiencing Church, when if we disband the regular meetings we lose all touch with those we gathered with. If we end the formal meetings and our relationships end too, then we've discovered something very important...we were never experiencing Church, as Jesus intended, anyway. We were just doing some religious meeting thing. If we disband the meetings and we can't stand to be apart from one another, and still take hikes together, talk on the phone, email, get together for dinner, discuss critical life issues, request prayer support, and encourage one another

in our difficult times, then we have likely been experiencing the real thing.

It is important for each believer to know why they gather and how this interlaces with being the Church. Otherwise we are just carrying out religious practices that have long ago lost their power to edify. If Church isn't more about "knowing" one another, and experiencing "community" of relationship, then it is exactly what one of our new "meeting" attendees called it, when someone called them during our gathering, and asked them where they were. "Oh, we're at a Bible Study, at Tom and Laura's house." Oh really? Is that what our gathering is? A Bible Study? Hmmmm, if so, or if that was just a conditioned response, then it might be time to take another look at things. To define believers getting together as an expression of being His Church, as a Bible Study, may be telling us that we have become about things that might be connected with our getting together with other believers, but ought not to be the primary definition of that gathering.

We're so programmed in our concept of Church, that if we're not in a Church building we aren't "at" Church. If we aren't "at" Church, but we are with other believer's in some sort of gathering, then our minds race to describe that gathering...umm "we're at a bible study..." Instead of just saying, "Oh, we're just hanging out with the Church at Tom & Laura's. Why not that description? Why do we have to be "doing" some clearly definable thing...like having a bible study? Why isn't it sufficient for us to just be hanging out with believers we love and desire to know in Christ, and to allow Him to express Himself through? No offense to the one who answered his call this way, but it may be very telling as to the "actual" nature of our gathering, no matter what else we may want to think of it as. If all we are essentially doing, in our getting together, is having a bible study, and this is the regular definition of our gathering, then I submit to you that this is far too narrow of a definition of the Church. At best it can only be a small component of it, but certainly ought not to be the primary definition.

We are a living community of believer's seeking to know the life of Christ among us. In our experience of this, yes, we will study the bible, we will pray, we will encourage each other, etc., but we must not primarily be a "Bible Study." Let me be clear on something here. I'm not saying having meetings that are essentially a "Bible Study," is wrong, or not an expression of His Church, but defining the gathering of the Church as primarily being a bible study is just too narrow a definition.

Let me just add a few thoughts on the reactions others will have to you, if you begin to define Church as a living fluid thing, made up of the experiences of Jesus' life whenever and wherever you gather with other believers, rather than in formal programmed meetings, some will be convinced that you are moving towards heresy, or being a rebellious cause of division in the body, or a cult, or ones who are drifting away from Church because of some unresolved wound or bitterness. They will worry that you are now going to isolate yourself and lose touch with the body of Christ. They have allowed themselves to be convinced that everyone must gather in religious buildings, with religious programs, on set days and times, and if they don't do this then they are not "committed" to the Church.

If you are to follow on to know the Lord, and do so in ways that are less ritual oriented and more relational oriented there will be those who are certain you are becoming a rebel and destructive. Just smile at them, avoid argumentation, assure them you love Jesus and His Church as much as ever, and then go and do what He leads you to do. You are not responsible to gain their agreement or their permission. Your agreement must always be first and foremost with the Lord Jesus, and only secondarily with other believers who share the same agreement in Christ. I'm not required to make them understand, nor to be

controlled by their concepts of Church. I'm called to follow Him outside the camps of man, and suffer any reproaches that may result from that following, and then to turn them over to Him for the things He would show them, as we continue to walk in the revelation He gives to us.

It is hard to walk in this manner, because most of the Church is used to thinking of the body of Christ as some sort of massive "control system," whereby we are controlled by rituals, practices, dates, times, legalistic rules, structures, programs, other people, etc. When we finally enter into the freedom we have in Christ, and recognize Church is about relationship, love, life, and service, then we are less concerned about structure and more concerned about life.

May God lead us into a true and living experience of being His Church.