

EDIFICATION IN EVERYTHING

by Steve Zeisler

Have you ever learned something about a problem which you were wrestling with by being confronted by someone who had the very opposite problem? For example, once when I was on a strict diet, hoping to lose some weight, I overheard someone complaining about how hard she found it to put on a few pounds on her thin frame. Then last week, Ed Silvoso, an Argentinian missionary, shared with us about the extraordinary increase in the church in Argentina as thousands of people are coming to Christ each week. There is a crying need there for pastors and teachers who will be able to instruct and care for this flood of new believers. Someone commented that we have the opposite problem in this part of the world. We have so many preachers and teachers we find it hard to incorporate into our Christian lives all that we are taught. If we were to compare the churches in both of our countries to armies, we could say that the Argentine church was a vast army lacking weapons, while the American church is armed to the teeth but lacks the manpower to do battle.

ENTHUSIASTS vs. SPECTATORS

I make this analogy because the issue which we will address today with reference to the church in Corinth has the quality of being the opposite problem of our own, and therefore it can be instructive for us. As we have seen time and again in these studies in 1 Corinthians, the believers in this church were activists to the core. They were enthusiasts for Christ, and possessed seemingly boundless energy. When they came together for worship, they sought to use all of their gifts in a very energetic display. But they were overly aggressive and often loveless in these manifestations. The twentieth century American church, however, seems to have no such problem with enthusiasm and activism. We are prone to letting others do the work of the church while we sit back and take in the spectacle.

The very idea that Christians could sit in front of their televisions and call that participation in the work of the church would seem bizarre to the Corinthians. Any kind of vicarious participation in the things of Christ held no interest for them. They wanted him and all that he offered for themselves and were constantly demonstrating that fact by their commitment to using their gifts, albeit in an unloving and aggressive fashion at times. This, however, is the day of the spectator sport. Christians today prefer to observe and not participate in the life of Christ. What a terrible blight this is on the character of the church!

The role of television pastor is an impossible one. How many times in the past few months have we seen one man after another crumble under the weight of this responsibility. Having accepted responsibility that was not theirs to begin with, and then having promoted themselves to a level that was quite outside their reach, they suffered public humiliation and disgrace in their fall. We have seen just such an incidence occur in our area in the past few days. I have talked with a number of people who feel broken, hurt and threatened by this latest disclosure. All of this is tragic for the pastor involved, who worked to become the focus of others' Christian walk; for the people who sought to put this man on a pedestal and use him to experience Christian life vicariously; and finally, it is tragic that the onlooking world once more is treated to another incidence of what they regard as the norm for Christianity in our day.

How different is our problem than the one which the Corinthians had to struggle with! They were too active in their expression, we are too passive. I liken the Corinthian church to a large, voluble family living in a house that is too small for them. They are forever bumping into one another. There are always lines for the bathroom. They talk too much and get on each other's nerves. Although they love one another, they are at times resentful of each other and impatient with one another. Today, the Christian body seems to gravitate towards what I would call condominium-type Christianity. We each want to have our own small space, at a safe distance from other Christians. We are polite towards one another and we are good, quiet neighbors, but we take good care

to maintain our privacy. We need to be reinfused with life. If the Corinthians were crowded and competitive, we tend to be isolated and private. Because they wrestled with a problem that was the opposite of ours, perhaps the very difference between us can be a source of help to us.

LARGE AND SMALL MEETINGS

When they gathered for worship, the first century church expressed itself in a number of different ways than we do today. For instance, they met for love feasts. They gathered for teaching in a synagogue-type setting. Paul taught for a long period in the rented Hall of Tyrannus in Ephesus. Thousands of Christians gathered both outside and inside the temple in Jerusalem for worship. Then there were the home church groups, small, intimate gatherings who shared fellowship together. It is this last grouping that we want to focus on this morning as we ask the question, What should the worship experience be when a small group of people come together as believers in Christ? And secondly, if we were to recapture the beauty of the small group gathering as it was practiced in the first century, would this be the answer to the problem of what we have called vicarious Christianity? I feel the answer to this question is yes. In his greeting to the church that met in the home of Prisca and Aquila in Rome, Paul wrote in Romans 16, "Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow-workers in Christ Jesus, who for my life risked their own necks, to whom not only do I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles; also greet the church that is in their house..." The church in Rome may well have met in large assemblies, but they also met in small groups, in this case the home of Paul's fellow-workers. This is the kind of setting we want to focus on this morning.

In verse 23 of chapter 14 the apostle says, "If therefore the whole church should assemble together and all speak in tongues..." This verse suggests that at times all of the Christians in the city assembled for meetings of some kind. We do not know where these meetings took place, whether they were held indoors or out in the open. The fact that they did take place, however, is established. Those were the occasions, says Paul, when unbelievers were likely to visit their fellowship, unlike a home church setting where outsiders were just not as prone to pay a visit. In the section to which we come this morning, however, it seems the apostle's instructions, at least by inference, are geared toward smaller groups.

Here is what Paul says:

What is the outcome then, brethren? When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification. If any one speaks in a tongue, it should be by two or at the most three, and each in turn, and let one interpret; but if there is no interpreter, let him keep silent in the church; and let him speak to himself and to God. And let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgment. But if a revelation is made to another who is seated, let the first keep silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all may be exhorted; and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets; for God is not a God of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints.

HOME CHURCHES

My reason for surmising that Paul is giving directions here to small groups, home churches, in other words, is that he says that those present can tell by means of a gesture, a whispered word or whatever, if someone sitting nearby wants to say something. Add to this his word in verse 31 indicating that all the prophets present should "prophesy one by one." The apostle envisions a setting in where there are two or three people who have this gift, suggesting that by taking their turn they can all get to speak. So here we are given Paul's directions for small group meetings, perhaps 12 or 15 people at most, meeting together in Christian fellowship. I believe we should try to catch some of the vitality of these sessions which the Corinthians Christians experienced. I pray that we will develop a hunger for this kind of fellowship, for a group in which we are known and where there is mutual accountability, awareness and a sense of connection to other Christians. It is clearly necessary for us to meet as a congregation, but there also needs to be small group gatherings. Let us make this a priority in our Christian lives.

In verse 26 we discover what went on in these small groups in Corinth: "...when you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification." Observe that Paul says "each one." Everyone participated when these groups met together. The same should be true in home churches today. Let us think through how this may be accomplished so that we do not fall into the trap of having one speaker, who does all of the preparation and teaching, and the rest of the group spectators who sit and take everything in. This is unhealthy. All should contribute, as the apostle directed the Corinthians.

For example, someone may have written a Christian song and he or she can share that with the group. Verse 26 is not saying that someone read an Old Testament psalm. The word really is "song." Another can share a teaching. In our Body Life services the leader will on occasion ask the congregation, "What has God taught you from the Scripture recently?" and someone will stand and share from the Bible what God has laid upon his heart. The Corinthians, of course, would have read and shared from the Old Testament. When someone prophesied, he shared a New Testament truth (gained from the preaching of Paul and other apostles, since most of the New Testament was not yet written and in general circulation), in a way that was applicable to the time and circumstances. That is what prophesying is. It is a truth given precise application to those present. This is what I was doing earlier when I commented on the recent revelation regarding a local television preacher. I sought to apply from Scripture a lesson which we all can learn from this type of circumstance.

When one prophet had spoken in the Corinthian small group setting, other prophets present critiqued what had been said, passing judgment upon it, as verse 29 points out. Perhaps they would add a second application or insight into what had been shared. When another offered a message in tongues, a word of praise or thanksgiving to God (as such a message should always be addressed), an interpretation was to be made. Obviously praise and thanksgiving offered from the first in intelligible speech is just as valuable (and more frequently experienced) as that which becomes intelligible only upon interpretation. The point of emphasis here is that all participate and that there is variety in what is offered to the benefit of all.

EDIFICATION

"Let all things be done for edification," says Paul in verse 26. We have already seen that this word "edification" means to build up and make stronger. A weightlifter edifies his arm, making it stronger, by means of his sport. The participants in the small group should be edified, built up, by their participation together. The need for strengthening of faith is most apparent to those who recognize the deadlines of the enemy confronting them. As long as you believe that powerful, subtle temptation is waiting to confront the unwary at every turn, then you need edification, building up, as a regular part of your Christian experience. Olympic hopefuls are spending these weeks before the Seoul Olympics putting themselves through a demanding regimen of training and exercise because they know that their competition will be intense later this year. When we meet in small groups to share the things which Paul has outlined here, we too become stronger and better prepared spiritually to meet the challenges and temptations that confront us in this dangerous world. Let us not settle for anything less.

Verse 33 says that "God is not a God of confusion but of peace." Vitality, edification, praise and prayer are very much part of the small group setting, but there should also be a feeling of God's approval, of things done well, evident by the sense of peace that permeates these occasions. Here, too, we see the need to recapture in our setting the benefits of small group fellowship that was so life-giving to the first century Corinthian believers.

CHATTER IN CHURCH

Verse 34:

Let the women keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but let them subject themselves, just as the Law also says. And if they desire to learn anything, let them

ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in church. Was it from you that the word of God first went forth? Or has it come to you only? If any one thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord's commandment. But if any one does not recognize this, he is not recognized. Therefore, my brethren, desire earnestly to prophesy, and do not forbid to speak in tongues. But let all things be done properly and in an orderly manner.

We need to interpret verses 34 through 36 in light of chapter 11, where women are addressed as to their role in Christian assembly. There we discovered that some women's new-found freedom in Christ had led to abuses. This was why Paul corrected their behavior. Some wives were wearing their hair in such a way that their husbands were shamed. Christians must never express their freedom in a selfish manner, as these wives were doing.

But it is also clear from this chapter that Paul expected women to have a vocal participation in church by praying and prophesying. I think this would be particularly appropriate in a small group setting. The word "speak" in verse 34 would be better rendered "chatter." Paul is referring to chatter and interruption by some of the women at the meetings. He is not referring to all women here but rather to some of the wives, perhaps even the same ones he takes to task in chapter 11 who wore their hair in an insensitive way, who were speaking up on matters which would be better suited to a discussion at home with their husbands. I can imagine such an incident occurring in the middle of a discussion following a word of prophesy, by a wife's inappropriate complaint to another matron across the room that her husband was acting irresponsibly with the family finances. Such matters might well be better discussed at home.

Verse 36 is a commentary on this whole section. It speaks not so much to the problem of some wives' chattering as it addresses the whole Corinthian problem. The women who were engaging in this were following along with the general tendency among the Corinthians to speak in tongues, prophesy, interrupt one another and act selfishly and unlovingly, so anxious were they to show their enthusiasm for their new faith. The apostle is appealing for decorum and order, asking that the gifts be used appropriately. The worship and fellowship which they shared in their home churches was so important to their Christian walk that they needed to do everything possible to make it meaningful and life-changing. Thus they should restrain themselves and act in a loving manner towards each other.

OVERCOMING PASSIVITY

The Corinthian Christians were aggressive; this was their problem. Too many Californian Christians, on the other hand, have a problem with passivity. The Corinthians had an excess of vitality that needed to be tempered and more focused; we seem to have lost our vitality. But in this section we have a blueprint for what is possible when small groups of people who are accountable to each other come together. All contribute and use their gifts, so that all are edified and strengthened. This is a critical need in the church today. I want to challenge us to do the same. For years, we have insisted that our pastoral staff meet weekly to study the Word and pray together. Despite all the pressures, time constraints and other demands, the wiser ones among us ensure that these meetings are a priority for us. We express our gifts, contributing ideas that lead to a vision for the church, in mutual submission. We find that we cannot do without the edification which these meetings bring.

Believers cannot live forever as spectators of Christianity in action. I urge you to seek out a circle of believers among whom you can play an active part in building each other up. Do not settle for anything less.

Vicarious religion has proven to be tragic in our day. It is hurtful to the cause of Christ. I am heartbroken by what has happened in our county in the last week. People have been hurt. The Lord's name has been ridiculed. Our best antidote to this is to be vitally connected to people who know us and who can build us up for the assignment to which we have been called.

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