

Expectations of the Assembly

Why are we here? I don't mean in a big, philosophical sense, but in a practical sense. Why are we in this room at this time and what do we expect to happen?

Christians meet in different places and in different ways all around the world. We are familiar with some in the US. Meetings in other cultures are different depending on how much American culture was transplanted by American missionaries.

Some people go to church because it is what they do. They haven't thought about it much more than that. Others think they have to attend or be in trouble with God. Others are looking for a spiritual experience, kind of a non-drug-induced high that makes them feel really good for a little while. The reasons go on and on. Some of them we can understand. Some make no sense to us at all.

As I talk about some of the things in the New Testament about why Christians get together, my objectives are:

1. To enlarge our expectations. If we don't expect something to happen, we will probably miss it and never know we missed it.
2. To be able to explain to others in a short and sensible way why we do what we do. It needs to be short, because people don't listen very long. And, it needs to be sensible if we want people to understand what we say.

Why do some Christians assemble and some not, or perhaps sporadically? Why do some assemble for an hour a week, some two, some four, or the really strange ones, ten hours or even more? Of course, some settle in at the frequency they do because that is what they were told many years ago, and so that is what is comfortable. That's not what I am asking. Rather, the question is, among those who make a conscious choice of how much time to set aside for assembling with fellow believers, why do they settle on the number of hours they have chosen?

In organizing this lesson, I came up with eight reasons why the early Christians got together. I did a lesson on this subject a little more than seven years ago. I re-read it recently and decided I really should do it again because I have learned a thing or two since then. While the reasons were valid, the applications were weighted too much to one side, so the picture it painted was lop-sided, tilted too much to what I like and not making allowances for the fact that everyone is not like me.

In organizing these eight reasons, I had to put one first. I selected 1 Corinthians 14:26 as the over-riding function. Remember the situation in Corinth. Culture was being carried into the

church by new converts – and since 100% of them were new converts, that was a lot. Since the church began, people have had a hard time shaking off what they have always done and being objective. I am certain that God was not surprised. After all, God made people, and He put people in the church and let them run it. The church was going to be a mess. But that was part of the plan. It is as if God is saying, “I can work with this.” The miracle is that the church still exists despite the people. And I don’t mean the people who, over the centuries have tried to stamp out the church from the outside. The miracle is that the church has survived the damage from the inside.

So, the point of looking at the reasons why Christians meet is not to find out exactly **what** we should do. That is all mixed up with culture and the craziness that is people. The point is to gain what we are supposed to gain so we can shake off the outside world and think as spirits.

So, I’m starting with a summary principle from Paul concerning the purpose for Christians getting together, 1 Corinthians 14:26, “Let all things be done for edification.”

But what is edification? Literally, it means to build. Twenty-two times in the New Testament, the same word describes to literally build a building. Thirty-three times it is used figuratively to describe building a person. But what does it mean to build someone up? How? In most churches, edification is interpreted as teaching – and we can see that in our own time together. Classes and sermons dominate our time together, as well as the time of other churches. But is that what was intended by the authors of the New Testament?

The most repeated building material in those 33 figurative uses of “build up” or “edify” is sensibility – common sense. I don’t think that common sense is imparted effectively in a lecture. Maybe in a group discussion. But I think that we come by common sense by observation and conversation about what we see.

If you think you have a least a little common sense, how did you come by it? Think about the skilled trades: carpenter, plumber, electrician, concrete worker. You may avail yourself of a certain amount of classroom training, but the learning happens on the job. You see the old guy doing the job a certain way; his way is fast and effortless, you are breaking your back and re-doing most of what you do. You figure out how he does that and copy it, and wonder why you never even thought of doing it that way, but it’s so simple and obvious. Common sense is imparted from person to person. It’s not like learning a complicated, really difficult skill, probably best learned in a classroom followed by endless repetition. Common sense is realizing how really simple and easy some things are.

The most common example of Christians being built up is in the imparting of common sense, making faithful life seem really simple rather than horribly complicated and frightening.

Of course, conventional teaching is in the list of 33 examples of edification – both by big-name people like apostles, and by one another.

Among the other examples of how we build each other up is the teaching of selflessness by example (not by lecture, homework, and tests). We are built up by thanksgiving. We are built up by singlemindedness – reminders of our unity and fellowship. We are built up by compassion for each other and the comfort we provide for each other. We are built up by our collective fear for the lost. Woven through all these methods for building up is the work of the Spirit that dwells in us. Edification is not just one thing or another. Edification focuses on the result, not the pathway. Sometimes we are built up by learning more of what is in the Bible. Sometimes, we are built up by seeing faith played out in a very simple and practical way. Sometimes we are built up by the simple fact that someone cares that I exist and is even happy to see me. The list goes on. We build each other up using the tools that work best for the part that needs building. It's as simple as that.

When we assemble, our expectation should be that we will be built up in a variety of ways, with facts and with passion, with clarity and with application.

Let's go back and look at a little bit more of that passage. "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." Whenever you come together, each of you... And who should the primary builders be? Before you left home to come here this morning, did you prepare to build up the others? If that expectation of the assembly had not been instilled in you previously, probably not. And remember, the assembly is not about what I receive, it's about the others whom I build up.

The second item on my list of expectations came from an unusual place: 1 Corinthians 11:33, "Therefore my brethren, when you come together to eat, wait for one another." I had to look back into the context to see what kind of eating he meant. It turned out to be the Lord's Supper. The context stretched all the way back to 1 Corinthians 10:14.

The Lord's Supper is a one-another activity. But can't I do it by myself? Yes, you can perform the actions. You can get some unleavened bread and fruit of the vine and remember Jesus. But remembering Jesus is only one part of the many images tied up as a package in the Lord's Supper. By my count, there are fourteen images tied together in the Lord's Supper. Of those 14, here are three that cannot be done by yourself.

One part of the Lord's Supper is like a sacrificial meal in which we celebrate our forgiveness with family and friends in the presence of God. That was the model God built for true sacrifice. Pagan sacrifice you can do by yourself. Pagan sacrifice is doing what I need to do to manipulate my God to do what I want. I can do that alone. God's version of sacrifice is a

shared event. God made sure that the Israelites sacrificed as a group by requiring that three-quarters of an animal had to be eaten by morning. You needed a good size group for that.

Another symbol in the Lord's Supper is that of fellowship – which does not mean eating together. Fellowship is connectedness of spirit. A part of the Lord's Supper is renewing the connection between our spirits. Outsiders think that's kind of weird, because their spirits have been dead a long time and they have totally lost track of where they might be. Conversely, a Christian is controlled by the eternal part, the spirit, that has been re-connected with God and is now seated in the heavenly places in Christ (Ephesians 2:6). One of the symbols of the Lord's Supper is a renewing of that invisible bond between the real spirits of real people. We cannot re-enact a spiritual union by ourselves.

Another symbol of the Lord's Supper that we cannot do alone is reaffirming our miraculous unity. Jesus prayed in the Garden in the night in which He was betrayed, "I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who believe in Me through their word; that they may all be one, as You Father are in Me and I in You; that they also may be one in Us that the world may believe that You sent Me." (John 17:20 – 21) One of the evidences that Jesus is God is supposed to be the miraculous unity of Christians. I say miraculous because no human institution in all of history has been able to achieve it.

Those are just three of the several purposes of the Lord's Supper – three that cannot be accomplished by yourself. Christians need to gather in order to celebrate forgiveness, re-affirm connectedness, and validate unity. It's a celebration, not a solemn ritual.

Moving along to my third expectation of the assembly, Colossians 3:16, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord." One of the ways we should teach is in song. Have you noticed that song lyrics do not contain complex theology? Song lyrics must boil down the thought to bite-sized pieces. Songs are memorable and simple. And with those same songs, we admonish.

What is it to admonish? To admonish is to remind others that they can do better. Camille starting using a line that was somewhat effective in her substitute teacher role. She switched from correcting to admonishing. Instead of telling misbehaving kids just how bad they were and exactly what they were supposed to be doing, she'd say, "You know better than that." Or, "You are better than that." Or, "You can do better." Admonishing is gentle, recognizing that the other person knows the right thing and wants to do the right thing – but somehow it just didn't come out that way this time.

Teach and admonish. How many of our songs actually do that? What is our expectation of the songs we sing? A lot of the modern ones are just fluff, no content. The value of a song

has very little to do with what it means to me or how it makes me feel, but how well it serves as a tool with which I can teach and admonish others.

My fourth reason for assembling, among the things we cannot do by ourselves, is in Hebrews 10:24 – 25, “And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.”

Stimulate, stir up, encourage, and exhort. Those are all positive ways to motivate. Even admonish is positive. It comes from the direction that you know that the other person knows better and wants better, so all you are doing is reminding. Stimulate, stir up, encourage, and exhort are positive, also. In fact, all of the passages in the New Testament that deal with one Christian motivating another are like that. There are always adjectives like gentle or humble or kind in the context. James contains a couple of very pointed reminders about that, like James 4:11, “Do not speak evil of one another,” and 5:9, “Do not grumble against one another.”

But, like the Pharisees of Jesus’ day, many people have come up with creative justifications for being critical of a fellow Christian, especially when that other Christian is not around. In the South, you can call anyone a dirty rotten scoundrel as long as you end it with, “Bless his heart.” People justify gossip by claiming that they are just speaking the truth in love, but I don’t hear a bit of love in it.

Out in the world, most people change the things they don’t like by negative reinforcement. In the church, we effect change by positive reinforcement: stimulating, encouraging, and exhorting. We build up their faith, having confidence that more faith will result in behaviors that I like. Unfortunately, there are a lot of people in churches who have no faith, so they deal with things they don’t like in the same way as the worldly people they really are. That’s what Jude says – that those worldly people in the church cause divisions because they do not have the Spirit. They are not really Christians. When you hear grumbling, gossip, or speaking evil of another, don’t sink to their level. Ask the complainer or grumbler or gossiper, “How are you going to encourage that person to increase his faith, because, obviously, if you increase his faith, this problem will take care of itself.”

When Christians are together, they build up one another through encouragement and exhortation. Exhortation – that’s a really strong pep talk. It’s the half-time locker room speech. Great coaches stimulate their teams to levels of performance that they ordinarily cannot achieve. We need to learn to do the same, stirring up each other to impossible levels of love and good deeds, because until we start doing the impossible, we are still mired in the world. When we unleash the power of God through faith, the impossible happens.

Moving along to expectation number five, comfort one another. Sometimes, being exhorted to achieve new heights of love and good deeds doesn’t work very well because the

world has been beating us up and we feel really lousy. The Christians in Thessalonica were enduring severe persecution. They were spreading the Word and loving each other, but we spend more hours in the world each week than we do with fellow Christians, so the bad stuff just begins to look like a mountain. That's normal. Paul reminded the Christians of Thessalonica about Judgment Day and being caught up in the clouds with Jesus and being with Him forever. Then, in 1 Thessalonians 4:18, he wrote, "Therefore comfort one another with these words." And he repeats himself in 5:11 with, "Therefore comfort each other and edify one another, just as you also are doing."

Several of these expectations of the assembly don't seem to fit in the auditorium format that is our custom. We can be edified by the sermon, although the "one another" part sort of gets left out. We can re-enact the Lord's Supper together, but we are seated in a theater-like setting where we can interact only with the back of someone's head. We can teach and admonish in song together, but we are all facing the same direction. And the other reasons that we get together are even harder. How do we stimulate and stir up and encourage and exhort and admonish and comfort one another? The one-another part seems to be restricted. Using some legalistic thinking, I could say that I do all those things because I put money in the collection plate. I pay others to do those things, so I get credit on God's ledger. Wrong. Remember that passage I started with back in 1 Corinthians 14:26, "Let each one..." There's a lot to do when Christians get together, and about two-thirds of it cannot be done in a classroom setting. Attending the general assembly at 11 o'clock accomplishes a few of God's goals, but only a few. Attending all three classes and the assembly accomplishes mostly the same ones. Some of the objectives are not given an opportunity to build up.

When you see the world pressing in on a fellow Christian's life, comfort. How do we know when they need comfort? We have to know them. How do we know when they need stimulation instead? We have to know them.

Edifying, re-connecting our spirits and reviving our unity in the Lord's Supper, teaching and admonishing in song, stimulating, encouraging, and exhorting to love and good deeds, comforting – these are all things that are supposed to go on when Christians assemble. If we lose the personal connection and become a bunch of individuals in the same room, we will drift either into legalism, in which we feel satisfied because we met some arbitrary benchmarks, or we will drift into the spiritual experience platform where I can weave my head around, sway back and forth, get a little dizzy, and think that by this I have connected with God – and there's not a bit of "one another" in it.

And number six, bear one another's burdens – Galatians 6:1 - 2, "Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ." The previous one, comforting, was for those who were having a rough time because

of the pressures of this world. This one, bear one another's burdens, is different. This is how we help those who have been overcome by the world, who have made really bad choices.

When we make bad choices, we generally suffer consequences. If you drink and drive, you are likely to pay a big fine, lose your license, or even go to jail, not to mention the additional problems if you hit something at the same time. If you cheat on your wife, you are likely to lose your family. If you don't get out of bed and go to work, you are likely to lose your job. These are natural consequences of bad choices. Of course, it is our job to help this fellow Christian get out of the ditch and back on the road – in a spirit of gentleness. But more than that, we bear their burdens. We pick up the weight of their stupid mistakes. We help them get back on their feet. Of course, there is a certain amount of wisdom needed here. We can bear their burdens, or we can enable their sin. How do we know where the line is? Only by knowing them really well. That's the one-another part. Without one-anothering, we'll just make things worse. Pray for wisdom, build up your faith, and dive into the messy lives of other Christians. You will make bad decisions – less often as time goes on. But the alternative, letting them sink on their own, is worse.

So far, all these expectations of the assembly have been about what I need to do for others. Number seven would be easier to take if it were that way, but this one goes both ways, James 5:16, "Confess your faults one to another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much."

I don't know about you, but I'm not real big on telling everyone about my flaws. I would rather keep them well hidden. I'll listen to you when you need to get something off your chest, but don't expect me to reciprocate. Isn't that how most people feel? Well, that's a problem. How do we overcome that problem? First, by being so close to one another that we can have that trust that (1) it's not going to be told all over town, and (2) you won't think I'm really strange because of my particular weaknesses. So, announcing my sins in the auditorium setting would be inappropriate. I'd be announcing my sins to some people with whom I have no connection. No, we need to do this with those with whom we share that connectedness of spirit, in whom we have trust. Again, the general assembly at 11 o'clock is not going to fulfill this part of healthy Christian relationships – this one-anothering. So our one-another time needs to get bigger. Like Hebrews 3:13, "Exhort one another daily, while it is still called 'Today,' lest any of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin."

And finally, number eight, from 1 Peter 5:5, "All of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility." What does that mean, be submissive to one another? If we did that in everything, we would be in real trouble if two people came to the door at the same time. "After you." "No, after you." "No, after you." "No, after you." So, what is Peter getting at? I think it is like Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 12 about the parts of the body being all equally important to the proper functioning of the body. Or as Peter wrote about using the gift you have.

Or as James wrote about not esteeming the wealthy as more important than the poor. I think Peter's point here in being submissive to one another is to view each person's contribution to the assembly as just as important as any other contribution. Some people are teachers, some are encouragers, some are comforters, some are admonishers, and some are singers. As Thurman has mentioned, a study of why people stay at a particular congregation is not so much about the teaching, but the encouraging.

Why did the early Christians meet? Because they loved each other and because they had a tangible connection between their spirits that tugged at them all day long. That's the basis of 1 John. Listen to the description in Acts 2:44 – 47, "Now all who had believed were together and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods and divided them among all, as any had need. So, continuing daily with one accord in the temple and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people." And in Acts 4:32, "Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul."

We meet to build up our faith; to re-vitalize the connection between our spirits and to re-affirm our unity through the Lord's Supper; to teach and admonish in song; to stimulate, stir up, encourage and exhort to love and good deeds; to comfort those being abused by the world; to bear the burdens of those who fell off the wagon; to confess our sins to one another and pray for one another; and to demonstrate to one another that we all consider the others more important than ourselves. These are things we cannot do by ourselves. This stuff requires teamwork, and it's not going to happen in an hour in an auditorium setting, or in four hours if you include all the classes. It is really hard to one-another the back of someone's head.

An equally important part of our time together is coffee and donuts at 9:30. It is an opportunity for one-anothering. That's why we have potluck – primarily to get the visitors to stay long enough so we can encourage them, but also another setting for admonishing, comforting, bearing burdens, and exhorting. Yes, we have times for lecture-style teaching and we have times for discussion-oriented classes. The way we have it organized is culture, not Bible. We are comfortable with our horseshoe of classroom tables and our theatre-style auditorium. The objective is to build up and connect with one another. The mechanics of it are only important to the extent that our practices don't detract from our objective. Unfortunately, sometimes we do exactly that. We can bore people or fail to connect with people or expect them to fit into the way we are comfortable doing it. Although our habit is to consider the auditorium time somehow more important than other times, in reality, all the times we are together are equally important.

Really, do you go to a family holiday meal for the food? Same thing with the church. It's about one another.