



Editors Note:

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The traditional Protestant worship service today strongly resembles a show business performance. In both we find ushers, programs, music, costumes, lighting, a chorus, a stage, a script, an audience, and a master of ceremonies. (Christian Smith, *Going To The Root*, Herald Press, p.88.) The congregation sits passively as the audience while the pastor performs. When the congregation is permitted to participate in the meeting, they are restricted to singing in unison, antiphonal readings, dropping money into the offering plate, and taking notes during the sermon. The ordained clergy are expected to perform all significant ministry. Meanwhile, ninety-nine percent of God's people attend worship services Sunday after Sunday for years on end, without ever contributing any true spiritual ministry to the body of gathered believers.

Is this the way God intended for His church to meet? Can the traditional model of church meetings be found in the pages of Scripture? It is my conviction that our tradition which expects the laity to remain spectators while the clergy conduct the "show" cannot be found in the pages of our New Testament, but is instead a serious aberration from the model revealed in the word of God. Rather, the New Testament describes the body of Christ as meeting in a manner in which every believer has the potential of contributing to the building up of the congregation in some significant way.

Historical Background of Church Meetings

In order for us to grasp the flavor of New Testament church meetings, we must first understand the nature of Jewish synagogue meetings, because they provide the necessary historical context. The apostles of Christ who planted the earliest Christian churches were Jews who had participated in synagogue meetings all their lives. No doubt, these meetings influenced the way early Christians gathered.

Synagogue worship allowed great freedom and participation. Philip Schaff has aptly noted, "As there was no proper priesthood outside of Jerusalem, any Jew of age might get up to read the lessons, offer prayer, and address the congregation." (Philip Schaff, *History Of The Christian Church*, Hendrickson, 1:459.) Indeed, we find Jesus constantly teaching in the synagogues on the Sabbath, (Lu.4:18-30; Mt.4:23; 13:54-58; Mk.1:21; Jn.18:20) even though he was neither a Levitical priest nor the ruler of a synagogue. Moreover, those who spoke in the synagogue meetings were not "pre-screened" as to what they were going to say, for Paul, directly upon his conversion, preached in the synagogues that Jesus was the Son of God to a group of hostile Jews (Acts 9:20).

Furthermore, Paul used the synagogue as his strategic starting point when evangelizing new cities because of this freedom to participate. On the Sabbath, he would enter a synagogue, and when opportunities for teaching and exhortation were given, would preach Jesus as the Christ. It was in the synagogue that Paul spoke in such a way that many of the residents of Iconium believed (Acts 14:1), that the Bereans received the word with great eagerness (Acts 17:10-12), and where he reasoned every Sabbath day in Corinth, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks (Acts 18:4). Indeed, the format of synagogue worship was so free that even strangers were permitted to bring a word of exhortation (Acts 13:14-41). Synagogue worship encouraged open participation. It is no accident that the meetings of the early Christians followed suit.

Kevin Giles in his book *Patterns of Ministry Among the First Christians* writes insightfully about the relationship between the synagogue and early house church meetings:

In the larger and more institutionalised synagogues we know that the main function of the ruler of the synagogue was to preside over services and to encourage the participation of those present. This is likely to have been the way the first leaders of house-churches functioned. The early Christians avoided the title used by Jews (ruler of the synagogue) and chose instead the neutral, but equally appropriate term *episkopos* [overseer]; yet they continued to hold that the chief duty of those who presided over assemblies was to facilitate widespread participation and not do everything themselves. If so, then it could be that in the new house-churches, where the Holy Spirit gave new life and dynamism, such persons found it was more their lot to limit participation than to encourage it! (Ken Giles, *Patterns of Ministry Among the First Christians*, Collins Dove, p.37.)

Spiritual Gifts in Church Meetings

In a previous chapter, we saw that the biblical purpose for which the church gathers is to edify one another. So, exactly how should we accomplish this? In most churches, the pastor bears almost the entire responsibility for edifying the saints, because he is the one who speaks most (or even exclusively) when the church assembles. Indeed, John Owen, probably the greatest of the Puritan theologians of the 17th century wrote, "on this office [the pastor] and the discharge of it he [Christ] hath laid the whole weight of the order, rule, and edification of his church . . ." (author's emphasis). The Reformers of the 16th century, the Puritans of the 17th century, as well as most Christians of the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries also embraced this view. But we must ask the question: Does the word of God establish this approach? On the contrary, 1 Corinthians 12-14 (the most lengthy section in the New Testament detailing principles

underlying early church meetings) says a great deal about the ministry of the many, but says nothing about the ministry of only one man when the church meets!

In 1 Corinthians 12 we find an abundance of teaching about the ministry of all believers. For example, in verses 4-6 Paul states that there are varieties of gifts, ministries and effects. Furthermore, he states in verse 6 that "God works all things in all persons." In verse 7 He informs us, "But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." Again in verse 11 we read, "But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills." In verse 14 Paul emphatically states that "the body is not one member, but many." (The way most churches meet, one would have thought the passage reads, "the body is not many members, but one!") Furthermore, in verses 15-25 the apostle goes on to explain that every person has a vital function within the church. All members are needed; none is unimportant. In light of this biblical teaching, how can we justify the idea that when we assemble, only the pastor may use his gifts while the rest of the body remains passive and silent?

In 1 Corinthians 14 the same truth emerges. In verse 1 Paul urges the entire church earnestly to desire spiritual gifts, but especially the gift of prophecy, because one who prophesies edifies the whole church (vs.5). In verse 26 he describes the church meeting as one in which each one has a psalm, teaching, revelation, tongue or interpretation. At the very least, this passage indicates that when the early church assembled, every believer had the opportunity to contribute to the edification of the whole body. Some bible scholars believe that in this verse Paul is rebuking the participatory manner in which the Corinthians held their church meetings. On the contrary, Paul does not command the Corinthians to stop meeting in a participatory manner. Rather, in verses 27-31 he gives guidelines for meetings which, though they establish order, still require participation by many! Paul's only corrective in verse 26, is his statement, "Let all things be done for edification." In other words, whenever anyone in the church contributes, he must do so with the intent that what he contributes will edify the rest. In verse 27 Paul allows two or three persons to bring a message in tongues, as long as these messages are interpreted. In verse 29 he informs the church that they should "let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgment." In verse 31 Paul teaches, "for you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all may be exhorted." In view of this, and the fact that Paul has been emphasizing the superiority of prophecy over tongues in church meetings all the way through the chapter, and that he does not repeat "at the most" after "let two or three prophets speak," as he does in the case of tongues (vs. 27), Paul's reference to two or three prophets speaking should probably be understood as two or three at a minimum. His teaching in 1 Corinthians 14 describes a church meeting in which all have the opportunity of participating, either through a song, a teaching, or some other spiritual gift. This practice may seem impossible in light of the fact that many churches today have anywhere from 200 to 10,000 members. Truly, in a church of that size, it would be impossible to provide an opportunity in which all could participate. We must remember, however, that the early church met almost exclusively in homes (Rom.16:5; Col.4:15). In that setting, where the number of believers could not easily exceed forty or fifty

people, the apostle Paul's remarks are much more intelligible. Jon Zens has insightfully written, "It seems to me that we have made normative that for which there is no Scriptural warrant (emphasis on one man's ministry), and we have omitted that for which there is ample Scriptural support (emphasis on one another)." (Jon Zens, Baptist Reformation Review, "Building Up The Body: One Man or One Another?" Vol.10, No.2, p.117.) William Barclay, though unreliable as a theologian, has written insightfully on the spirit of a church meeting as pictured in 1 Corinthians 14:

There is no more interesting section in the whole letter than this, for it sheds a flood of light on what an early church service was like. There was obviously great freedom and an informality about it. . . it must remain true that if a man has a message to give his fellow men no ecclesiastical rules and regulations should be able to stop him giving it. It is a mistake to think that only the professional ministry can ever bring God's truth to men. There was obviously a flexibility about the order of service in the early Church. Everything was informal enough to allow any man who felt that he had a message to give to give it. It may well be that we set far too much store on dignity and order nowadays, and have become the slaves of orders of service. The really notable thing about an early Church service must have been that almost everyone came feeling that he had both the privilege and the obligation of contributing something to it. A man did not come with the sole intention of being a passive listener; he came not only to receive but to give. (William Barclay, *The Letters To The Corinthians*, Westminster Press, p.134-135.)

Many Christians today ignore the teaching in 1 Corinthians 12-14 because they believe that the gifts of prophecy and tongues have ceased with the closing of the New Testament canon. While a wide diversity of opinion exists in the church today about these gifts, all Christians believe that the singing of psalms and teaching should still occur in the meetings of the church (1Cor.14:26). Thus, even if a large segment of the church believes that tongues and prophecy have ceased, they must still grapple with the participatory spirit in the early church in which any could contribute a song or teaching, among other spiritual gifts.

Other Christians believe that though 1 Corinthians 14 does suggest that the church at Corinth met in a participatory manner, it does not serve as a model for us today, because it was spiritually immature and in need of correction from the apostle in many respects. When Paul writes to them, however, he first describes their church meetings as "each one having a psalm, a teaching, etc.," and then goes on to give them the overarching guideline for everything that takes place in their meetings - "let all things be done for edification" (1Cor.14:26). If the Corinthians were in error in conducting their meetings in a participatory manner, surely Paul would have taken the opportunity in this letter to set them straight. But this is the very thing that he does not do. Although Paul does establish judicious guidelines so that their meetings are conducted in a proper and orderly manner (vs. 40), he does not prohibit mutual participation, but

instead encourages it ("let two or three prophets speak," "let the others pass judgment;" and "you can all prophesy one by one"). Others point out that in Paul's later pastoral epistles in which he gives instructions concerning church order, teaching concerning open participation is notably absent. We must remember, however, that Paul writes the pastoral epistles to apostolic representatives (Timothy and Titus) regarding their particular responsibilities to the churches they served. We would expect Paul's emphasis in the pastoral epistles to be different from his letters to entire churches. In his letters to churches, Paul directs the whole body as to their mutual responsibilities to one another; in his letters to particular individuals (Timothy and Titus) he directs them as to their particular responsibilities to the church. Thus, nothing in the pastoral epistles contradicts the full ministry of elders and the full ministry of the entire body.

Still others argue that Paul directs the Corinthian church to minister to one another because it didn't have elders yet. They say that when the church had appointed elders, Paul's instructions on mutual body ministry in the church gatherings would become obsolete as the elders took upon themselves the duty of edifying the church. This, however, is an argument from silence, the least convincing kind of all. Scripture never states that there were no elders in Corinth. On the contrary, in 1 Corinthians 16:15-16, Paul mentions the household of Stephanas as those who have devoted themselves for ministry to the saints, and the ones to whom the church should subject themselves. Though these individuals are not specifically identified as elders, Paul's instructions indicate that they functioned as such. Furthermore, we have every reason to believe that the church at Corinth had elders, as this was the uniform practice of the churches that Paul planted (Acts 14:23; Tit. 1:5).

If 1 Corinthians was the only New Testament book in which all believers were taught to utilize their spiritual gifts for the benefit of the whole, the above-mentioned objections might carry greater weight. The apostle Paul, however, teaches this same practice in other letters as well. For example, in Ephesians 4:15-16 he exhorts, "but speaking the truth in love we are to grow up in all aspects into Him, who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by that which every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love." In this passage Paul directs the entire church to speak the truth in love. Additionally, every individual Christian (each individual part) must work properly in order for the whole body to grow and build up itself in love. In other words, the edification of the whole body is not the responsibility of one man or a few men. Rather, it is the responsibility of all.

Again, in Romans 12:3-8, the apostle makes this point crystal clear. "For through the grace given to me I say to every man among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith. For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of

another. And since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let each exercise them accordingly: if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith; if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching; or he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness." Notice several things about this passage. First, God allots each Christian a measure of faith by which he exercises one or more spiritual gifts. Second, God gives different Christians various functions to perform within the body. Third, each Christian is responsible to exercise his gift. Fourth, the gifts Paul lists are those we would expect to see when the church meets: prophecy, service, teaching, exhortation, giving, leading, mercy. Thus, the biblical pattern is uniform - all God's people have the privilege and responsibility of employing their respective spiritual gifts in order to build up the whole church in Christ.

The apostle Peter echoes the sentiments of Paul as well. "As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. Whoever speaks, let him speak, as it were, the utterances of God; whoever serves, let him do so as by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever" (1 Pet.4:10-11). Notice that Peter emphasizes that each believer has gifts, and that he is to employ them, or put them to work. Furthermore, these gifts are comprised of two basic kinds - speaking and serving gifts. Although believers can and should serve one another throughout the week in all kinds of situations, a natural place for believers to put speaking and serving gifts to work is in the meetings of the church. Would not a recipient of Peter's letter have immediately thought of the church meetings as the logical starting place in fulfilling this command? Is it not natural to assume that believers should employ their gifts when they assemble? Is that not what Paul is urging in 1 Corinthians 14 (especially verses 26-31)? Is there any reason to assume that Peter is not describing the church as gathered in 1 Peter 4:11-12? It is unlikely that someone would conclude that Peter wanted his readers to use their spiritual gifts exclusively at times other than church meetings unless he held a previous bias against mutual participation in church meetings.

Mutual Exhortation in Church Meetings

Not only is the body responsible to edify one another through the exercise of spiritual gifts when they gather, they are also to edify one another through mutual exhortation and encouragement.

In Hebrews 10:23-25, the Scriptures declare, "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more, as you see the day drawing near." Notice

that this text describes the saints as assembling together. But exactly what are the saints supposed to do when they assemble together? The text does not leave us in doubt; the whole body is to stimulate one another to love and good deeds and encourage one another. Furthermore, no mention is made of the pastor performing this stimulating and encouraging ministry. Rather, Scripture says, let us stimulate and encourage. The author of Hebrews is urging the whole body to take up these duties. Often these verses are used to rebuke church members who miss an occasional meeting. However the intent of the passage is to warn professing Christians of "forsaking" (a strong word which means to desert once and for all) the gatherings of the saints and returning to the Old Covenant law, priesthood, and sacrifices. It is a shame that this passage is used so often to browbeat church members into faithful attendance at the stated meetings of the church (which is not the original intent of the passage) but is not used to give direction to the functioning of the church when it has assembled (which is the intent of the passage). The text clearly links mutual exhortation and encouragement with the assembling of the saints. Our church traditions have misconstrued this text to mean, "let the pastor consider how he may stimulate the church to love and good deeds and encourage the rest of the body as he sees the day drawing near." The author of Hebrews goes on to explain why it is so important for the church to exhort and encourage one another when they assemble. "For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain terrifying expectation of judgment, and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries" (Heb.10:26-27). The meaning of the passage is clear. The fire of hell awaits those who apostatize from the truth. Mutual encouragement and exhortation are the means the people of God must use to avoid apostasy. We neglect these means at our own peril. A dozen systematic theologies line the shelves of my personal library; I have consulted each and every one, and have yet to find one which mentions mutual exhortation as a primary means of the perseverance of the saints. Though mutual exhortation is a biblical means of perseverance, it is one which the church has neglected far too long. Mutual encouragement and exhortation then, according to God's Word, should occupy a central place in the activities of the gathered church. Surely, when one man (the pastor) performs all the exhorting and encouraging, the clear pattern of New Testament church meetings has been violated.

One Anothering in Church Meetings

Not only do we see participatory church meetings emphasized by the stress laid upon each believer to utilize his spiritual gift, and exhort one another when the church gathers, but we also find it in the more than fifty "one another" commands of the New Testament. Scripture enjoins believers to:

1. Love one another (John 13:34-35; 15:12,17; Rom.13:8; 1Thess.3:12; 1Thess.4:9; 2Thess.1:3; 1Pet.1:22; 1Pet.4:8; 1John 3:11; 1John 3:23; 1John 4:7,11,12; 2John 1:5)
2. Be devoted to one another (Rom.12:10)
3. Give preference to one another (Rom.12:10)

4. Be of the same mind toward one another (Rom.12:16; 15:5)
5. Not judge one another (Rom.14:13)
6. Pursue the things which make for the building up of one another (Rom.14:19)
7. Pursue the things which make for peace with one another (Rom.14:19)
8. Accept one another (Rom.15:7)
9. Admonish one another (Rom.15:14; Col.3:16)
10. Greet one another (Rom.16:16; 1Cor.16:20; 2Cor.13:12; 1Pet.5:14)
11. Wait for one another (1Cor.11:33)
12. Have the same care for one another (1Cor.12:25)
13. Serve one another (Gal.5:13)
14. Not challenge one another (Gal.5:26)
15. Not envy one another (Gal.5:26)
16. Show forbearance to one another (Eph.4:2)
17. Be kind to one another (Eph.4:32)
18. Forgive one other (Eph.4:32; Col.3:13)
19. Speak to one another (Eph.5:19)
20. Be subject to one another (Eph.5:21)
21. Regard one another as more important than yourself (Phil.2:3)
22. Not lie to one another (Col.3:9)
23. Bear with one another (Col.3:13)
24. Teach one another (Col.3:16)
25. Comfort one another (1Thess.4:18)
26. Encourage one another (1Thess.5:11; Heb.3:13; Heb.10:25)
27. Build up one another (1Thess.5:11)
28. Live in peace with one another (1Thess.5:13)
29. Seek after that which is good for one another (1Thess.5:15)
30. Stimulate one another to love and good deeds (Heb.10:24)
31. Not speak against one another (James 4:11)
32. Not complain against one another (James 5:9)
33. Confess your sins to one another (James 5:16)
34. Be hospitable to one another (1Pet.4:9)
35. Employ your spiritual gift in serving one another (1Pet.4:10)
36. Clothe yourself with humility toward one another (1Pet.5:5)
37. Have fellowship with one another (1John 1:7)

I have personally counted fifty-nine New Testament references to "one another" responsibilities. The critical question then becomes: when should the church obey these commands? Some may argue that we should obey these commands outside of the regular meetings of the church. However, how would a first century Christian have understood these commands? What better opportunity would he have to love, serve, admonish, exhort, fellowship, accept, greet, forbear, build up, encourage, comfort and teach other believers, than in the gatherings of the church? I readily admit that these one-another commands should be obeyed throughout the week, whenever believers are with each other. But obedience to them should certainly characterize the meetings of the church, which comprise our primary opportunities to meet with one another.

I submit to you, that if we are to obey these New Testament "one-another" commands, it is important that interaction and open participation characterize our meetings. If the people of God assemble week after week, month after month, year in and year out, as silent spectators in clergy-dominated meetings, it is unlikely that they will consistently obey these commands.

Joint Sharing in Church Meetings

The New Testament Scriptures affirm that joint sharing should form another important activity in our church meetings. In 1 Peter 3:8, all are exhorted to be sympathetic toward one another. The Greek word translated "sympathetic" literally means "suffering or feeling the like with one another." (The New Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon, Hendrickson, p.596.) It should come as no surprise, then, that Paul commands believers to "rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep" (Rom.12:15). Furthermore, he notes, "if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it" (1Cor.12:26).

In order for us to obey Paul's clear teaching, we must open up our meetings so that people can share their burdens, or rejoice together in God's blessings. In many churches, if a brother comes to a meeting with a wonderful blessing from God he wants to share, he must scurry around after the meeting, in order to communicate it to five or six others before they drive home. Similarly, in most churches, if someone's heart is breaking with sorrow, there is no place in the meeting for them to unburden their hearts and receive the prayer and ministry of the body. Why not open our meetings so that the whole church can rejoice with us in our blessings, and minister to us in our sufferings? In this way, all may be encouraged by the joyful, and minister to the sufferer.

Historical Decline of Church Meetings

As we have seen, New Testament church meetings abounded with openness and mutual participation. In this respect, they were very different from our one-man performances today. How have our churches drifted so far off track? What happened to cause the church to go from open participation to passive spectating? Like any new movement, the church began to gradually become more and more institutionalized shortly after its inception. In the second century, because of a fear of heresy from within and persecution from without, the authority of the bishop rose dramatically in the church. (Each local church was previously shepherded by a plurality of gifted servants called elders - Acts 20:28; 1 Pet.5:1-4). At the same time, these bishops began to retain an increased amount of the ministry which had previously belonged to

the whole body. Slowly but surely, clergy-dominated meetings replaced the exciting and invigorating participatory meetings of the New Testament church.

The final blow came early in the fourth century, when Emperor Constantine in 313 issued the Edict of Milan which granted Christians freedom from persecution by making Christianity a legal religion of the State. After Constantine professed the Christian faith, he not only legalized Christianity, but paved the way for it to become Rome's favored religion. During the years that followed, Constantine ordered many large church buildings built at public expense, began paying salaries to the bishops and presbyters of most congregations, and promoted many Christians to positions of prominence and prosperity. The small and simple church meetings held in homes gave way to large and complex meetings in state-funded "sanctuaries." Prominent orators preaching long and eloquent sermons took the place of ordinary believers sharing their heart-felt exhortations. Body participation gave way to professional eloquence; spontaneity to rigid structure. Eventually, the only way ordinary church members could participate in church meetings was to sing or chant in unison together.

Early in the 16th century Martin Luther recovered several key biblical doctrines which served to spearhead the Protestant Reformation. One of these was the "priesthood of all believers." Luther held this doctrine, however, primarily in a private sense, rather than within the corporate body of Christ. For centuries the Roman Catholic church had taught that God's people were dependent on the officially set apart clergy (priests) in order to receive God's grace. Luther, on the other hand, taught that every believer could go directly to God through Christ to receive God's grace for himself. In that respect, all believers had immediate access to God through the Spirit, and were all priests. Luther and the other reformers, however, did not implement the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers in the meetings of the local church. They replaced the communion altar with the pulpit and the priest with the pastor, but clergy dominance and member passivity continued to dominate the meetings of the church. Such continues to be the case in most Protestant churches to this day.

Our Journey in Implementing Participatory Meetings

When I arrived at Milpitas Bible Fellowship in 1990, our meetings were fairly typical of most other churches. After thirty to forty minutes of worship, I would give the announcements, preach my sermon, and pronounce the closing benediction. We experienced little if any real interaction and mutual body ministry during our meetings. The whole church looked to me as its source of edification. When God began opening my eyes to the importance of participatory church meetings, my first reaction was one of fear. I was terrified at what might happen if I truly opened up the meetings for all of God's people to minister. I feared our meetings would turn into bedlam

if I gave all an opportunity to speak. I wrestled with these principles for some time until the strength of conviction overcame my fears.

In the Summer of 1996, we began implementing these principles. Our first step was to open up various homes during the week for "house church" meetings. These "house churches" functioned as small group meetings for believers where each could learn to interact, pray, encourage, exhort, and minister to one another. Almost everyone was enthused about these home meetings, although at first we were a bit unsure how to function in them.

After a few months, as we became more comfortable with these informal home meetings, we began introducing more participation into our Sunday gatherings. I informed the congregation that anyone could participate by reading Scripture, praying during a lull in our praise singing, or starting a song that was on their heart. I brought the podium down from the platform to the lower level so that I could be closer to the people, thereby encouraging mutual interaction. We rearranged the chairs into concentric semi-circles so that we could look into one another's faces when speaking, instead of the back of someone's head. We bought a wireless microphone and began passing it around to those desiring to share what God had been doing in their lives or to encourage us by declaring what God had been teaching them from His Word. Sometimes these sessions included exhortations, admonitions, teachings, or the sharing of blessings or burdens. One woman revealed that she had recently been diagnosed with cancer. This allowed the whole church the opportunity to tangibly express their love and commitment by gathering around, laying hands on her, and praying. These changes felt a bit awkward at first. We had no previous model to guide us, and thus, felt a bit uncomfortable with them. Before long, however, many began contributing some very edifying insights and exhortations.

Furthermore we began opening up our meetings directly after the sermon for questions, comments, and insights from others. I was very hesitant about this new move, fearing that all doctrinal purity might be lost if everyone was permitted to comment from the Scriptures. On the contrary, this new aspect of our meetings proved especially enriching. Often someone would bring an insight that I had missed in my sermon preparation that would open up the text in an important way. At other times, people shared insights as to how they could personally apply the text under consideration. On still other occasions, someone would ask a question that many others had on their mind, but would not have voiced. Instead of producing doctrinal confusion, I found that the questions and comments enabled me to allay confusion by addressing the real issues which were perplexing the church. On those rare occasions when someone stated something unbiblical, I was able to gently refocus the church by bringing them back to Scripture. Instead of producing chaos, I discovered that it fostered spiritual maturity, intimacy, and love for the brethren. In fact, by adding the time of questions and comments, the church was easily able to concentrate on the Word of God for well over an hour. Often this segment proved to be the most invigorating and helpful of the entire meeting. Whereas our

previous meetings lasted about ninety minutes, the new participatory meetings usually took a minimum of two hours to complete. The consensus of the church, though, was that the quality of the meetings was well worth the additional time spent together. The new meetings began to spawn additional interaction among the people. Many began going out to eat after the meeting to spend more time together. Sometimes up to half of the church could be seen piling into a Taco Bell, Burger King, or McDonald's after a Sunday morning meeting to continue their discussion of the things of God.

I cannot overstate the importance of creating an atmosphere of freedom for body participation in the meetings of the church. When church members do nothing but sit, listen, and take notes week after week for years on end, they tend to stagnate spiritually. Spiritual growth requires us to flex our spiritual muscles and apply the truths we are learning. What good is it for our people to learn that God wants them to use their spiritual gifts, exhort one another, bear each other's burdens, and rejoice with those who rejoice if we make no provision for them to do that when the church meets?

Having been involved in participatory church meetings now for almost two years. I know that I would find the traditional model stifling and unsatisfying. God has proven over and over that as we step out in obedience to apply the patterns we see in His Word, His blessings are sure to follow.

Conclusion

In most churches today church meetings look more like a professional performance than the family of God meeting under the headship of Christ to edify one another. It is time for the church of Jesus Christ to return to its New Testament roots. One of the slogans of the Protestant reformers was "always reforming." One area in which the contemporary church desperately needs ongoing reform is that of providing mutual ministry and participation in its meetings. Will you take up the challenge in so far as you have influence in your local church to seek reformation in its practices in order to conform to Scripture

By Brian Anderson