

UNIT THREE

WHY THE EARLY CHRISTIANS MET TOGETHER

GATHERING TO EXPRESS THEIR FELLOWSHIP IN CHRIST

- Acts 2:42 provides a brief summary of the activity of the first community of Christians in Jerusalem, but it would be wrong to regard this as a 'service outline'.
- Luke is giving a brief portrayal of the ministry of these disciples to one another in a variety of contexts, not simply describing what happened when they gathered for 'church'.
- Their meeting in the temple courts (2:46) appears to have been specifically to hear the apostolic preaching — these early converts may have wanted to identify themselves with the preaching of the gospel as an act of testimony to its truthfulness.
- The 'fellowship' of 2:42 may refer to the sharing of material blessings described in 2:44-45 — an expression of the new relationship experienced together through a common faith in Christ.
- Clearly, there is a mutual fellowship of believers that arises from this sharing together in Christ — this has a practical outworking in generous giving and the sharing of their lives together.
- The breaking of the bread refers to the common meals shared in their homes — described in terms of the custom of breaking a loaf and distributing it to all those present.
- The reality of Christian fellowship was expressed from the earliest times, as Jesus intended it, in the ordinary activity of eating together — but these meetings had a special character due to their focus on the person and work of the Lord.
- Other references to Christian assembly in Acts indicate that they met for thanksgiving and prayer, teaching and fasting.
- Although these passages show some parallels with the Jewish synagogue, Luke describes the early Christian communities as expressing common participation in Christ and fulfilling responsibilities to each other, rather than a focus on the Law.

GATHERING FOR THE EDIFICATION OF THE CHURCH

- **Meeting with God**

- Paul's single use of the worship term *proskynein* is in I Corinthians 14:24-25, where he describes an act of submission or unconditional surrender to God.
- The language implies the conversion of the unbeliever, and an expression of repentance and faith.
- The same language is not used in connection with the regular gatherings of God's people, but the passage does suggest that God can be encountered when the church gathers for mutual edification.

- **Meeting as the body of Christ**

- Paul regularly uses the terminology of edification rather than worship to describe the purpose and function of Christian gatherings.
- It is easy to think of edification purely in terms of spiritual advancement of individuals within the church — but there is an Old Testament background to consider as well.
- The restoration of Israel after the exile is promised in terms of God building a people for himself.
- From Ephesians 4:7-11 we learn that Christ builds his church through the people he provides as apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastor-teachers.
- Just as the message given to Jeremiah was to be the means of re-establishing Israel, the church is built through the preaching of the gospel.
- Edification occurs when Christians minister to each other in word and deed — focusing on individuals learning to contribute to the life and development of the Christian community.

- **Exercising their gifts in love**

- In I Corinthians 14, Paul does not rebuke the tongues-speaker for self-edification as such, but indicates that this falls short of the primary goal of Christian assembly.
- Paul's teaching challenges the assumption that church services should primarily encourage a private communion with God — he envisages that we should come together to take part in the building up of the church.
- 'Speaking the truth in love' is the means by which edification takes place.
- Paul focuses on bringing to the congregation 'some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching'.
- Public praying and singing must be intelligible and truthful so that others may be able to say 'Amen' and be edified.

- The very act of ministering the truth to one another should be an exercise of love — only when a church is functioning in this way can it be said that it is being edified.
- Order is important, one person should speak at a time and the rest listen, and all should be encouraged to exercise their gifts.
- **The ‘horizontal’ and ‘vertical’ dimensions of edification**
 - In Colossians and Ephesians, the God-directed ministry of prayer or praise and the notion of edification are intimately linked.
 - Psalms, hymns and songs, which are expressions of faith and thankfulness to God, are also means of teaching and admonishing one another.
 - Participation in the edification of the church is an important expression of our devotion and service to God.
 - Mutual ministry is a way by which the word of Christ may dwell richly amongst believers (Colossians 3:16).
- **Prayer and praise together**
 - Thanksgiving, prayer and praise are important in Paul’s letters — he reports his own personal practice, incorporates prayers at appropriate points and encourages others to follow his example.
 - Thanksgiving and prayer are closely connected — although thankful for past blessings, he is constantly urging the churches to move forward in their Christian life.
 - Paul is aware of the need for maturity and perseverance in faith, hope and love — especially as he looks ahead to the return of Christ.

GATHERING FOR MUTUAL ENCOURAGEMENT IN CHRIST

- **Exhorting one another**
 - The writer to the Hebrews does not specifically use the language of worship when talking about Christians meeting together — they are urged to focus on mutual encouragement (10:24-25).
 - People are also encouraged to constantly spur one another on to godly living, to love and good deeds.
 - Every Christian meeting should be used positively as a means of mutual encouragement or exhortation.
 - Hebrews focuses on the care that members of the church should have for each other — care should be taken in case *anyone* should have a sinful, unbelieving heart.

- If individuals are to be concerned about the community, then the community must also be concerned about individuals.
- **Maintaining confidence in God and his promises**
 - The writer to the Hebrews looks at the purpose of Christian gatherings in terms of mutual ministry with a focus on God's coming kingdom.
 - Church meetings should enable believers to maintain their confidence in Christ 'firmly to the end'.
 - Meeting together with Christians on earth is a way of anticipating our participation in the heavenly community.
 - We can help each other to realise the benefits of belonging to Christ and so maintain our confidence in God and his promises.
 - Regular and systematic exposition of Scripture and the teaching of sound doctrine by those appointed to do so is important, but some space for the informal contributions of members should also be provided to preserve the balance of New Testament teaching.