

The Essential Simplicity of the New Testament Church

By Alan Stenfalt

1. Worship

Half a lifetime ago a young man walked out one bright Sunday morning, looking for someone to answer his question. “How can a man be right with God?” His reading of the Bible had put the question in his heart and he was sure the Bible had the answer, but for a long, agonising, eighteen months it had eluded him.

Quite unaware that they had long since lost the answer anyway, he was strangely constrained to walk past one then another place of worship he had imagined might suit his purpose. Somewhat bemused, he stood on a street corner wondering what to do. Looking round for inspiration he saw a diminutive building with a sign outside announcing a church service. He did not have to decide to go in – there seemed an inevitability to it. He was already beginning to feel he was entering a new world.

There were a dozen or so people inside, which looked a reasonable crowd for the size of the room. What immediately struck him was not so much the quietness as the “stillness” and even as he sat down he somehow knew this was the right place. Everything that followed, the sense of peace, the reverent adoration of God, the clear portrayal of Jesus as He is revealed in Scripture, even the behaviour of the children, convinced him these people knew the answer to his question and knowing it was the explanation of the serenity that surrounded them.

Not many days later, in a hotel room in Scotland, God began to speak to him. Not in an audible voice you understand, but through the Scriptures. For some two or three hours Paul’s letters came alive. It was as though he was reading letters addressed to him personally. His heart and eyes were full as the love and grace of God overpowered him. He was a new man. The world was new. The only thing he wanted was to be with those people who he was sure had the same experience. Before the end of the week he was.

Over the following years the Lord’s Day services followed the same simple framework of that first encounter. There was little to divert attention from the

worship of God the Father through God the Son in the power of God the Holy Spirit. No collection, no notices or other distractions. The eternal Creator God was worshipped and adored in reverent and fervent prayer, hymns were sung with a plain, unobtrusive and sympathetic piano accompaniment. Scripture was read, expounded and faithfully applied and the Lord Jesus Christ was proclaimed as the only Saviour of sinners. Peace and joy in believing were hallmarks.

That simplicity of worship was sustained in the midweek meeting. In fact it was somewhat enhanced in that the meeting proceeded without the imposition of any program or direction, apart from that of the Holy Spirit and the Word of God. The only things that were predetermined were the time of start and the brother who would expound the Scriptures. No hymns were chosen beforehand; no topics for prayer were announced. No one called the meeting to order, no one called for someone to open in prayer or choose a hymn.

After brief personal greetings the assembled church would sit round in a large circle quietly preparing their hearts to serve the Holy One who had promised His presence in the midst. At the appointed time the silence would be broken as one of the brethren would call for a hymn to be sung, open in prayer or perhaps give a suitable verse of Scripture. So the meeting would continue. A brother may share with the church some passage of Scripture through which God had blessed or helped him, or some particular need of which he was aware. Another might address God in prayer with worship, adoration and thanksgiving. News of believers who had been ill or of happenings in other churches would be shared.

On alternate weeks, the Lord's Supper was an integral part of the midweek meeting. It did not interrupt the proceedings but fitted seamlessly into the worship. Again, nothing was pre-planned. At an appropriate time one of the brethren would request a suitable hymn, another might speak of the blessings that attend participation in the meal. He would then give thanks for the bread, break the single loaf and pass it round the body of the church. The same would be done for the single cup of wine from which all shared.

At some point the brother who was to expound the Scriptures would feel it right to bring God's Word to the church. Men and women participated fully in the meeting in the respective roles God had assigned to them. At the close any necessary announcements or matters the elders wished members to consider were given. With the addition of a prayer meeting early on Saturday mornings, these were the only meetings of the church.

Our friend found the sense of fellowship in these meetings to be a great joy. To be able to see each other's face as hymns were sung during the midweek meeting really did give the sense of admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs (Col.3:16). In the simple sharing of bread and wine the Lord's death was proclaimed to God and to each other - till He comes.

All this (and more) was what our friend was born into and brought up on as a Christian. I know it was so, for I was there. Its essential simplicity was in stark contrast to much of what he would meet with today.

It should not be supposed that this simple form of meeting was introduced as a reaction to the “hymn sandwich” or the “one man ministry” so derided in some quarters. The motivation was an attempt to move towards the biblical record of NT worship found in 1 Cor.14:26-40. What we are shown there is that various brethren simply made their contribution to the meeting (v.26).

The objection is made that such a “free for all” leads to chaos, confusion and irreverent worship. This, of course, is exactly what was happening in the church at Corinth and is what gave rise to the apostle’s teaching in chapter 14. His remedy for the situation, however, was not to tell the Corinthians to stop meeting in this way and put the meeting under the direct leadership of one of the elders. Rather he showed them where they were going wrong and gave simple instructions on how to behave when they met together. Everything was to be done decently and in order and with the objective of edification - building one another up, rather than parading their gifts. To rectify a chaotic situation, instances are given where certain individuals were to keep silent (read the whole passage).

Paul makes it quite clear that what he has written here are the commandments of the Lord and confidently expects they will be fully accepted by all who are spiritual. It does not follow then, that such a meeting as is described here will necessarily be out of control, dishonouring to God or undermine the Word of God. What the apostle has written in 1 Cor.14 is the Word of God. To conduct a meeting that follows the pattern and the direction found in this passage is therefore, to recognise the lordship and rule of the Head of the church and to honour and love Him by obeying His commandment.

The church has been given God’s revealed will in the inspired Scriptures and He has appointed under shepherds to exercise oversight of the flock of God in their charge by applying the teaching and discipline where necessary.

When this is done and care is taken by all not to grieve the Holy Spirit, He may come and give His own glorious lead to such a meeting. When this happens, those privileged to be there will feel they are treading the verge of heaven itself.

Peel off the layers of tradition that have been accumulated by the churches over the centuries and a beautiful simplicity is found in the NT record. This is true not only in worship, but also in the way the church is governed, which will be the subject of a further article.