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"Encourage One Another"

- Heb 10:25

The New Testament indicates that all believers are important in the body of Christ (Ro 12:3; 1 Co 12:4-31), and that "each part" has a role to fulfill (Eph 4:16). In the church assembly all should have the opportunity to contribute something toward the mutual edification of one another (Ro 15:14; 1 Th 4:18; 5:11-14; Heb 3:12-13), that is, equipping, admonishing, comforting, and encouraging each other.

In Heb 10:24-25 the believers are to "consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds" in their assemblies. In the context of spiritual gifts (Ro 12:1-8) all believers are given gifts (v 6), some of which should be prominent in the assembly (vv 7,11,18) so that all may contribute in the edification of the body (v 7).

Clearly then, in the early church all were to be involved in the assembly in some way, for if one was missing the whole body would be affected (12:18-26). In today's traditional churches it is common practice that one man, usually called "the pastor," uses his gift before a congregation which must sit back and passively listen to his message. But where in all this is the mutual edification of "one another"? How can all believers function within the body if only one person is allowed to use his gift? It is the purpose of this chapter to probe the New Testament in order to find out just why the early church practiced mutual edification, and thus in turn to see how this applies to our churches today. Let's consider a few relevant passages.

In Eph 4:11-16 we see that "each part" has a job to do (v 16). In v 11 a list of church leaders is given. He gave some to be apostles, prophets, evangelists, and "pastors and teachers" (one person in Greek). Traditionally the pastor-teacher is said to be responsible for what is stated in vv 12-13; that is, "For the equipping of the saints for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith . . ." (NKJV). Thus it seems from this passage that the pastor-teacher has three tasks to perform: 1) equipping the saints, 2) the work of the ministry, and 3) the edifying of the body of Christ. However, though the pastor-teacher does indeed have a part in these activities, the rendering before us may mislead. In 4:12 the word "for" occurs three times in our English text. But in the Greek text the preposition changes. Whereas the English is rendered "for," the Greek reads *pros . . . eis . . . eis*. Thus the text is stating the purpose for equipping the saints ("so that they can do the work of the ministry") which will in turn result in the entire body being built up. This is to go on until we all come to the unity of the faith-in essence, throughout the present age.

In too many churches today the pastor-teacher attempts to perform these important tasks alone. But, biblically speaking, his job is merely to prepare the saints so that they can do the work of the ministry and thus build up the body of Christ. We find that same truth in 4:16-"From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work." One person should not be given the whole load of responsibility, and, indeed, the New Testament bears this out.

In 1 Co 12 spiritual gifts come into view. Several points are worth mentioning about this passage. First of all, spiritual gifts are given to believers by God (vv 11, 18, 28). Second, we see that each believer is given a gift (vv 6, 7, 11, see also 14:3-5, 1 Pe 4:8-11). Third, these gifts are given in order to edify the church (v 7, see also 14:3-5; 1 Pe 4:8-11). Fourth, there are different kinds of gifts (vv 17, 21-23, see also Ro 12:4-5; Eph 4:15-16). Fifth, the main point of this chapter is that every gift is needed (12:7, 21-23; Ro 12:4-5; Eph 4:15). We cannot miss this. It is important that all believers use their gift(s) in order that the body might function as a body.

Some gifts are normally considered non-assembly gifts; that is, gifts used in everyday experiences, not necessarily during the time that the church gathers together (e.g. "mercy," Ro 12:8; "faith," 1 Co 12:9; and others). But surely we are to use whatever gifts we have within the context of everyday life (not merely once per week), and even the gifts just mentioned may be demonstrated during the assembly time. Furthermore, there are a number of gifts that are specifically mentioned in 1 Co 12-14 that are to be exercised within the assembly, not the least of which is prophecy-something anyone could do (14:31)-yet these gifts are rarely (if ever) exercised in today's assembly. Why is this? The problem probably stems from the overall structure of today's churches. Most churches do not allow for all believers (any believer?) in the assembly to participate. Indeed, any attempt to do so is the quickest way to be ushered out of the assembly! One possible exception to this is congregational singing. But even here it is highly structured and regulated. There is certainly no room for unscheduled and spontaneous praise or singing. As it is, the believers in the congregation are merely spectators who watch the leaders of the church perform. Worse, Christians are instructed not to "interrupt the service" and are assured that quiescence is their proper place.

In 1 Co 14 Paul gives us a picture of the church assembly in Corinth. In the context of those times when "the whole church comes together" (v 23), it is apparent that anyone could contribute a psalm, a teaching, a revelation, or an interpretation (v 26). All of these things were to be done in order to strengthen the church. In verse 29 we are told that "two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said." Since prophecy is highly regarded by Paul for its valuable contribution to the edification of the body (14:3-5, 12, 26), and since later he says that "all can prophesy one by one" (v 31), it seems best to take verse 29 to mean at least "two or three" (in contrast to the tongue speakers who were to be at the most two or three in number). Although it is not our purpose here to teach on prophecy, one thing may be certain: prophecy was not the preparation and preaching of a sermon (as is often supposed) but rather a "revelation" that could come to someone while someone else was speaking (v 30). Wayne Grudem (*The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*) has argued convincingly that prophecy is an insight that is given by God to edify the body. The point is that there is to be mutual interaction-anyone who wants to is supposed to be able to participate in this. Sadly, this is the very thing that is suppressed in today's churches. Hence, by our rigid structures which disallow such participation, we are guilty of quenching the Spirit (1 Th 5:19).

A biblical theology of spiritual gifts and the edification of the body demands that all believers be involved. One of the reasons that the early church was so dynamic and radical is because there was opportunity (indeed, expectation!) for all believers to be involved in the building up of the body. It is difficult to imagine how something like this can be accomplished (the way it is supposed to be accomplished) in the current setting of most churches. The early church met in small intimate groups in each other's homes. This was surely a key ingredient to their spiritual growth. This setting fostered spontaneity as well as opportunity for the participation and interaction of all believers. There seems to be no good reason not to follow this pattern, unless one wants to argue that his ministry will somehow be limited in a small church. On the other hand, are we really willing to trade-in the

spiritual well-being of the body for the fame of one man-the pastor?

- T.E.

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