

Clustering around the table 3 I Corinthians 14:1-5, 26-32, 39-40

So far we've thought about the fact that the early believers met in homes. We can't be sure how big these homes were, how much space the followers of Jesus had in which to share their meal and create 'church'. The likelihood is that no more than 30 gathered in any one place. Last time we began to think about this question: given just the gospel and the town we live in, how will we create church that builds believers and gives outsiders a chance to see, hear, understand and respond to the gospel? It's not that easy to answer; but it's worth trying.

In I Corinthians 11-14 we read how one group of churches in a particular place and time answered it. What Paul talks about here is not really a special event, separate from daily life; rather this is normal life transformed by the presence of God in Christ crucified in the power of the Holy Spirit. This ordinariness was one of things that puzzled and intrigued outsiders. So what's happening here? What follows are three observations about the Corinthians' gathering with some possible lessons for us:

I) purpose

In the culture of Paul's day, any gathering that contained a meal followed by a structured conversation was known as a 'symposium'. After eating in the late afternoon/early evening, the Romans did one of two things – either they had entertainment that could often get wildly out-of-hand (this is probably what Paul has in mind in I Corinthians 5-6!) or they had a leisurely, structured conversation on an uplifting subject. The early Christians took this model and used it for their purposes, which for Paul were two-fold – the first more important than the second:

i) building believers: the Greek term Paul uses to describe the aim of getting together is *oikodome*, which means building or edifying (see especially 14:3, 5, 12, 26). The Christians gathered together so that they would be built up to live increasingly effectively as disciples in their daily lives. The regular meetings around the meal table were preparation for worship, rather than worship itself: our worship is to live lives offered to God 24 hours a day, seven days a week (see Romans 12:1)

ii) bridges to outsiders: a secondary purpose – but an important one – as far as Paul is concerned was what effect the believers' gathering would have on the outsiders who came and went from the place they were meeting. Such outsiders would be around for a number of reasons:

- ✓ Possibly they were the household servants of the host and hostess who are not Christians but were involved in the offering of hospitality in some way;
- ✓ Possibly they were clients of the household who came to pay their respects to their patrons at the same time as the followers of Jesus gathered;
- ✓ Perhaps they are neighbours who have been invited to share the meal and the Christian symposium that follows it because the host wants to commend the Christian way to them;
- ✓ Possibly they are the non-believing spouses of believers that Paul had talked about in 7:12-16.

- ✓ Possibly they are visitors from another town who have arrived in the household on business and require hospitality and are there when the believers gather.
- ✓ Maybe they are nosy neighbours or messengers sent by influential people to check out what the followers of Jesus get up to at their symposia

Whatever the reason for their presence, the key thing, as far as Paul is concerned, is that they have the opportunity to hear, understand and respond to gospel. This is why he stresses the need for intelligible speech rather than tongues (6, 11f, 16, 24f) and socially acceptable conduct by married couples (11:2-16; 14:33b-36). In short, the gathering should be transparent and as comprehensible to outsiders as possible.

2) participatory

The key thing about the symposium: was that everyone round the table joined in, that every contribution mattered. The trouble at Corinth is that the rich and the strong thought their words were more valuable than anyone else's. Paul lays out his ideal Christian symposium in 26-33a:

i) sharing the problem at Corinth is not silence but everyone speaking at once! Everyone who came was expected to join in, to give as well as get: do we? Or are we at church only for what we get out of it?

ii) size matters: clearly joining in a symposium is much easier in a group of 30 than 300. The real challenge for us in our situation (given our history and size) is how can we encourage participation by everyone? One answer is to meet in clusters of 30-50 for our main gathering when we break bread, learn, build one another up, etc

3) prophetic edge

The point of the Christian symposium was to hear God so that we might be built up and outsiders might be drawn to the faith (24f). This happens, says Paul, through prophecy – but what is that?

i) sweated word: 26: some had a word that had been gnawing at them all week, they had worked on it, thought it through and spoke it out in the gathering. The word might come through our quiet time or as we chat with a brother or sister. Are we listening to God through the week to have something to share on Sunday?

ii) spontaneous word: 30-33: sometimes – hopefully often if we're open to it – God speaks here and now. It is most likely that this word comes in response to the sweated word being shared. Are we open to being the vehicle of such a word?

Paul's concern is that it happens – and happens every time the believers gather – so that the sharing of the prophetic word leads us deeper into mind of God. Why? So we'll be built up as disciples for our daily life of service & witness in world. For Paul, this was the only point in gathering together: is that why we're at church?