

Clustering round the table 2

1 Corinthians 14:26-33

Think about what is the one physical asset we have that will help us build faith and make Jesus known in our town? For 1000 years the obvious answer to that would be our church buildings. That was not the answer Paul would have given. Does his practice have any lessons for us where we are? Let's see...

1) places to gather:

See the notes to Clustering round the table 1 for a discussion of homes and how the early followers of Jesus used them.

There are three key lessons for us as we read about what the early Christians did and think about our own context. This is not an appeal for us to do what they did in Corinth. Rather, it's a suggestion that we look at how they did church where they were and the principles underlying their practice, so that we can think about how we might do church where we are.

2) porous boundaries

Paul didn't cut the church off from all the comings and goings of Corinthian homes – he couldn't have even if he'd wanted to. Rather, he says we need to be sensitive to outsiders when we gather as communities of Christians: let's not do anything that gives the wrong impression, puts people off, stops them hearing gospel.

The key text is 14:40 which sums up the whole discussion in 11-14. And there are two crucial examples of Paul's thinking and advice:

i) wives: (see the fuller notes on Worship and Social Climbing).

Married and single women could participate fully in leading and teaching in the Christian gatherings but like men they need to pay attention to how their gathering looks to outsiders. In particular Paul emphasizes two things:

- ✓ messengers – possibly the dress code police or nosy influential neighbours who could cause trouble if they saw wives behaving inappropriately in terms of their dress in a public gathering
- ✓ mission – visiting men should not put off women ministering inappropriately dressed. Christians in Nepal and Pakistan separate the sexes in their worship so as not to offend local sensibilities. This is the tension of 9:19-23 in action; note the summary of Paul's advice in his teaching on eating and shopping (1 Cor 8-10) in 10:31-11:1. So, he adds, this means that wives should not be interrupting the assembly to ask unnecessary questions of their husbands – especially in the area of discerning what prophets are saying: 14:33b-36.

Note how this word to wise on wives opens and closes whole section – 11:2-16, 14:33b-36 – so it obviously mattered to Paul. Are there issues we face similar to this?

ii) tongues: lots of cults in Corinth did ecstasy – is that all the church is? See 14:16-17, 23-24: the key, says Paul, is to be understood so people can hear and respond to gospel. Paul doesn't want the Christian faith to be seen as just another religious option in supermarket of faiths; it was far more than that.

So, how do we draw people close and not repel them by being slightly strange, by doing odd things and asking them to join in with us in doing them?

3) positive identity

The presence of outsiders means we need to know who we are as God's people – that we are Christians first and foremost rather than Corinthians!

i) from periphery... for this reason, some of the things the Corinthians thought were really important – tongues and special knowledge – and maybe some of the things we think are vital to how we do church – our traditions, music and ways of doing things – are just so much window dressing (13:1-3), nice but...

ii)... to the centre: one word sums up Paul's teaching on our identity: **holy** – 1:2, 4-7, 30f; 6:11; we are the temple of the Holy Spirit as individuals (6:19f) and as a community (3:16). The church is God's new people created through the cross of Christ, filled with his Holy Spirit (12:13), forgiven, cleansed and made new to reflect his glory.

Do we know who we are? Do we remind each other? It's vital that we do otherwise our porous boundaries will allow in all kinds of things that will define us in ways not derived from the gospel and we will not reflect who we are clearly to our neighbours. And it would be tragic if they didn't clearly see the gospel in our lives.

4) pragmatism

Paul doesn't have a blueprint for church.

- ✓ He doesn't talk about structure, rarely mentions leaders – in fact he really does seem indifferent to all that – much to our annoyance sometimes!
- ✓ He does ask: given the gospel and the town we live in, how will we do church that builds believers and gives outsiders a chance to see, hear, understand and respond to gospel?

How will we answer that question?

Next time we'll look at what these believers actually did when they clustered and what we might be able to learn from that...