

Assembly fellowship: expansion?

An Enlarged Heart

Psalm 119. 32 I will run the way of thy commandments, when thou shalt enlarge my heart.

True enlargement starts internally, in the heart. It is not like a business plan driven by external systems e.g. an ‘Amazon’ approach or a ‘Macdonald’s’ approach to church growth, which sometimes, sadly, we see! Amos the prophet warned the Ammonites that a ruthless approach to enlargement of their borders would bring His judgement (Amos 1.13). Our motive for growth is the first issue. It must be for the glory of and honour God and not for us to boast about. The first sign of enlargement starts in worship, reverence and waiting upon God. If expansion is to happen it must start in my own heart.

The first Christian assemblies grew in worship and reverential fear:

“so the Church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria were edified and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, were multiplied” (Acts 9.31)

And again at Ephesus, ‘*And this was known to all the Jews and Greeks also dwelling at Ephesus; and fear fell on them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was **magnified***’ (Act 19:17). Also, the first gentiles who were saved in Caesarea were known for their fear and worship to God: ‘*But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him.*’ ‘*For they heard them speak with tongues, and **magnify** God.*’ (Act 10. 35, 46). Mary was at the first prayer meeting and breaking of Bread (Acts 1.14; 2.1) and we are quite sure her heart was enlarged in worship: ‘*And Mary said, My soul doth **magnify** the Lord*’ (Luke 1 46).

The early Christians learned that God’s assembly was the place where believers could fulfil their divine function as a priest in the priesthood (1Pet 2.5, 9), enjoy the immediate presence of Christ (Matt. 18.20) and worship God (Heb. 13.14-15) and pray in God’s temple (1 Cor. 3). Like Hannah, their heart was enlarged in worship and in prayer: ‘*And Hannah prayed, and said, My heart rejoiceth in the LORD, mine horn is exalted in the LORD: my mouth is enlarged over mine enemies; because I rejoice in thy salvation*’ (1 Sam 2.1). The Lord promised Israel that worship in His house was a prerequisite to enlargement: ‘*For I will cast out the nations before thee, and enlarge thy borders: neither shall any man desire thy land, when thou shalt go up to appear before the LORD thy God thrice in the year*’ (Ex 34. 24). All revivals start in prayer and God getting His first place in our lives. The strengthening effect of praying together and for one another (Acts 4.22-24, 31). And depending upon the Lord grew. I am sure Lydia (Acts 16) could measure the progress of her prayer life from down by the river and then as the assembly met in her home. Beside Lydia would be the rough Jailor who before salvation might not have been able to string two sentences together without swearing and is now is rising to pray in the prayer meeting! There prayer meetings were real and authentic. Is this the reason why we are not seeing enlargement? Has the prayer meeting been relegated in importance?

The first Christian assemblies grew in family unity and love

An enlarged heart for the Lord increases our heart for one another. They came together in unity as a family (with one accord) and supported one another and as a result the Lord added more: “*and they were all with one accord in Solomon's porch.... believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes of men and women...*” (Acts 5.12, c.f. 5. 14-16; 2. 1; 4. 32a).

This growth in unity and love was something Paul encouraged the assembly in Corinth to do, He said His heart was enlarged for them despite the fact that he had to correct them for some of their practices and he longed to see the same enlarged heart for him in return. 2 Cor 6.11 ‘*O ye Corinthians, our mouth is open unto you, our heart is enlarged*’. 2 Cor 6.13 ‘*Now for a recompense in the same, (I speak as unto my children,) be ye also enlarged* (this word means to broaden as broadening a road – do not be narrow in your love)’. We need to pray for bigger hearts of love for one another especially if we have to bring a ministry of correction. We also need to pray we never get complacent. Remember the church in Laodicea: ‘*Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked*’ (Rev 3. 17). Remember the church in Ephesus left their ‘first love’ and as a result the Lord threatened to close the assembly down (Rev 2. 4-5).

The assembly is a body (1 Cor 12), **the place of Christian love, friendship and practical care** where believers can experience Christian love and fellowship and shepherding (Acts 2. 44-46; 6.1). Their love for one another grew. Initially they did not know one another but their practical care grew. The unity developed – think of the assembly in Caesarea, the first to have Jew and Gentile to break bread together (Acts 10), they had to get over all these cultural hang ups (Eph 4.1-3) Shepherd care grew as well (1 Peter 5. 1-3). Initially some of the assemblies had no elders but this soon changed as those with a care for the flock emerged. Elders are not needed for the being of an assembly, but they are needed for the well-being of an assembly (Acts 14.21-23).

Practical kindness grew. Big tasks emerged that were met by the assembly and this practical love seems to be linked with more enlargement, for example looking after the widows, the poor and the vulnerable:

*‘Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business.... **And the Word of the Lord increased** and the number of the **disciples multiplied** and a **great number of the priests** were obedient to the faith’ 6.1-7 also 4.32b.*

There did not seem to a lot of administration but a lot of personal exercise. Their service grew, their gift developed, their ministry widened and the manifestation of God’s power as they developed their unique gift for the benefit of others and to bring glory to God (Acts 6. 2-4; I Cor.12.14-31).

When Paul was received (word is ‘joined’) into assembly fellowship he was ‘*coming in and going out*’ with them (Acts 9.28) The word “joined” means ‘glued or cemented together’. Believers were received to the assembly with all its privileges and responsibilities. They were not received to the breaking of bread only. They became part of the “fellowship”, “prayers”, “breaking of bread”, “teaching of the apostle’s doctrine” (Acts 2. 42-46). They were not hangers on but members together in the body of Christ (1Cor. 12.27). Assembly fellowship was not casual or partial but was complete, full and permanent. No one regarded it as a loose affiliation or just another association or club to add to their CV or the itinerary of life! Believers were seen to be “coming in and going out” with all the other believers. It required commitment and huge sense of the dignity, privileges and responsibilities of such a position.

The early Christian assemblies had increasing love for the world of men and women around them

Paul says that we should remember the ‘poor’ (Gal. 2.10). James is clear that this increase in practical care and love stretches to all in society including orphans and the most vulnerable as well (Jas.1. 27). A man called George Muller fed thousands of orphans every day in the Bristol on the principle of faith. This principle of faith has not changed. Over the centuries Christian love has been seen in action looking after the orphan or looked after child through fostering or adopting, looking out for the alcoholic, drug addict, women who have been abused, refugees, those suffering from mental illness, poor families, helping people in old age and infirmity, or the unhealthy or people suffering from prejudice e.g. people from different cultures or language groups. This practical interest in others was noted and admired by unsaved people even if they felt they could not join them: ‘*And of the rest durst no man join himself to them: but the people **magnified** them*’ (Act 5. 13).

Their love extended to poverty on a world-wide scale. We have examples of extensive giving for the poor believers (Rom. 15. 26) in Jerusalem by assemblies in Corinth and Macedonia in Greece (Rom.15:26-28; 2 Cor.8:1-9:15) resulting in long and dangerous journeys by sea and land in order to give the aid to these distant places. This attitude is exemplified in the life of the Apostle Paul: ‘*According to my earnest expectation and my hope, that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but that with all boldness, as always, so now also **Christ shall be magnified in my body**, whether it be by life, or by death*’ (Phil. 1. 20).

All of this is tough. It requires personal sacrifice. Enlargement is not easy! And when assemblies do expand it requires greater care and more work. All this should check our motive for expansion. Will we be ready for it when it comes?

Is our heart too small – is this why we have not seen revival?

Enlarged Faith

And so were the churches established in the faith, and increased in number daily (Act 16. 5)

‘Not boasting of things without our measure, that is, of other men’s labours; but having hope, **when your faith is increased**, that **we shall be enlarged** (same word translated magnified) by you according to our rule abundantly’ (2 Cor. 10. 15).

Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God (Rom. 10. 17). So, if faith is to be increased it will be through the Word of God.

Growth in Scripture – they ‘preached the Word’ (2 Tim 4. 2)

The Lord had taught in His famous parable of the Sower that the kingdom would grow through the sowing of the Word of God and could only grow through the sowing of the seed: ‘And other fell on good ground, and did yield fruit that sprang up and increased; and brought forth, some thirty, and some sixty, and some an hundred’ (Mark 4. 8).

The early church believed this and practiced it. **And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith** (Act 6. 7). *But the word of the Lord grew and multiplied*” (Acts 12. 24). ‘*And every day, in the temple and at home, they ceased not to teach and to preach Jesus as the Christ*’ (Act 5. 42)

The local assemblies preached the gospel of Christ

They preached the gospel in market places (Acts 17. 17), in schools (Acts 19. 9 - Ephesus), in amphitheatres (Acts 17. 19 - Athens), in prisons (Acts 16. 25-31 - Philippi), by rivers (Acts 16. 13) in boats (Acts 27. 21-25) and wherever opportunity arose. There is no mention that they preached in purpose-built halls for the preaching of the Gospel, although that is not to suggest that this is wrong to do so. The early church took the gospel to the people.

Their preaching was Christ-centred

‘preached through Jesus the Resurrection of the dead..... and many of them which heard the Word believed and the number of them was about five thousand’ Acts 4. 4

We have 19 complete or partial sermons in the Acts of the apostle and 16 private conversations about Christ. We should model our preaching and our conversations on the early template. Their complete focus was preaching Christ alone but broke it down to the various audiences making it relevant according to their situation and congregation. To the Jews they could show that Jesus was the Christ from the scriptures (Acts 17. 3), to an African Eunuch with some understanding they preached “Jesus” (Acts 8. 35) to an idolatrous, pagan city of Athens Paul preached from **creation** that God could be known in the person of Christ (Acts 17) quoting Athenian poets.

Sometimes the preaching was targeted at particular language groups: ‘**Spoke unto the Greeks**, preaching the Lord Jesus ... *and the hand of the Lord was with them: and a great number believed and turned unto the Lord*’ Acts 11. 21.

The preaching was not a one off but a sustained thing. *‘And he [Paul] continued there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them’* (Acts 18.11). *‘And this continued by the space of two years; so that all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks’* (Acts 19. 10).

There preaching was effective in repentance and in transformed and separated lives.

‘Many of them also which used curious arts brought their books together, and burned them before all men.....so mightily grew the Word of God and prevailed’ (Acts 19. 19-20). It did result in persecution: *“Therefore they that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the Word”* 8. 4; 11. 19

The early church also believed in discipling

Matthew 29. 20 *Go ye therefore, and teach (make disciples) all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.*

Everyone had someone else they were discipling. Do we?

Did the early Christian assemblies change the method at any point? Was their music, puppet, drama or art ministry? No, despite the Romans loving all of these activities, there is no scripture to support this practice. The emphasis is in using words i.e. preaching:

- *For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel: not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect (1Cor.1.17)”*;
- *“Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine (2Tim.4.2)”*;
- *“How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach, except they be sent? as it is written, How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things!” (Rom.10.14-15).*
- *“But hath in due times manifested his word through preaching, which is committed unto me according to the commandment of God our Saviour (Titus 1.3)”*;
- *“For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe (1Cor.1.21)”*

Do we think that by changing our methods we will have more success?
Is it not time to cast ourselves upon our God in prayer and contrition?

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