

# Is Attending Church A Spectator Event?

by Darryl M. Erkel

When most Christians think of attending church, they usually think of sitting silently in their pews and observing the ministry of a select and highly privileged few (i.e., the pastor and his ministerial staff). They know that very little is expected of them--the "laity."

In fact, the very idea of coming to church to mutually edify and minister to the saints is foreign to the thinking of most evangelicals. And, yet, the New Testament knows nothing of an inert, believer-priesthood whose only function is to passively absorb sermons and pass the offering plate! But isn't such passivity on the part of the members the most obvious thing within our church meetings?

In contrast to our man-made traditions, the New Testament teaches that gathering with the brethren is a participating event where each believer is allowed to contribute his or her spiritual gift for the common good (1 Corinthians 12:7; 14:26). Please consider the following passages and ask yourself, "Is my church allowing me to contribute in this way?":

"And since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let each exercise them accordingly: if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith; if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching; or he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness" (Romans 12:6-8).

"Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. And there are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons. But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (1 Corinthians 12:4-7; cf. vv. 8-14).

"So also you, since you are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek to abound for the edification of the church" (1 Corinthians 14:12).

"What is the outcome then, brethren? When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification" (1 Corinthians 14:26; cf. vv. 27-32).

"Bear one another's burdens, and thus fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2).

"... but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him, who is the Head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by that which every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love" (Ephesians 4:15-16).

"Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God" (Colossians 3:16; cf. Ephesians 5:19).

"Let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more, as you see the day drawing near" (Hebrews 10:24-25; cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:11,14).

"As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. Whoever speaks, let him speak, as it were, the utterances of God; whoever serves, let him do so as by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ ..." (1 Peter 4:10-11).

In light of the above texts, were the early church gatherings marked by mutual ministry and edification--or--were they marked by silent saints who passively sat in their pews? Did their meetings focus on the gifts and contribution of each believer who was present--**or--did it focus on one man and his illustrious sermon?**

If the New Testament teaches that the gathering of the saints is to be marked by multiple participation and the exercising of our spiritual gifts, why do most of us come to church and not say or do anything? Why aren't pastors encouraging their members to minister and edify one another on Sunday mornings? How can we continue to justify placing our responsibility of mutual edification and ministry into the hands of professional clergymen? One brother has said it well: "We have centered all our ministry in our paid professionals and thereby sold our birthright for a padded pew."

The truth is, our traditional and contemporary ways of having church with its passive "laity" and overworked "clergy" doing the entire task of ministry simply has no basis in the New Testament. Edward Schweizer, in his description of early Christian worship, writes:

The togetherness of the church and its services is not that of a theater audience, where one or several paid actors act on the stage while everybody else is looking on. Each one takes part with his special gift ... the body of Christ is not a body of soldiers in which one sees at best the neck of the preceding man ... it is a body consisting of members living in their mutual addressing, asking, challenging, comforting, sharing of Christ and His gifts ("The Service of Worship," Neotestamentica [Zwingli: Zurich, 1963] pp. 335-336).

The late D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, pastor of Westminster Chapel in London, has said:

Are we giving the members of the church an adequate opportunity to exercise their gifts? Are our churches corresponding to the life of the New Testament church? Or is there too much concentration in the hands of ministers and clergy? You say, "We provide opportunity for the gifts of others in week-night activities." But I still ask, Do we manifest the freedom of the New Testament church? ... When one looks at the New Testament church and contrasts the church today, even our churches, with that church, one is appalled at the difference. In the New Testament church one sees vigor and activity; one sees a living community, conscious of its glory and of its responsibility, with the whole church, as it were, an evangelistic force. The notion of people belonging to the church in order to come to sit down and fold their arms and listen, with just two or three doing everything, is quite foreign to the New Testament, and it seems to me it is foreign to what has always been the characteristic of the church in times of revival and of reawakening (Knowing the Times [Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1989] pp. 195-196).

If the ideas contained in this paper are true, is it not obvious, then, that we have seriously departed from the teaching of Scripture? Does it bother you that most of what we associate with "church" has little to do with the New Testament (e.g., church buildings, one man alone who is elevated as "pastor," the Lord's Supper as a token meal, pastoral search committees)?

**How can we claim to take the New Testament seriously as our "rule of faith and practice," and yet turn a deaf ear to clear, undeniable patterns of multiple participation which marked the early apostolic churches?**

If our current practice contradicts the New Testament, **why do we keep affirming it as our infallible guide?** Why don't we just admit that we do not really care what the New Testament says, and that we prefer our inherited way of doing things? What are YOU prepared to do about this?

If we are to see genuine church renewal, we must begin to speak out against false ecclesiastical traditions and practices. We must rethink our views of the local church, its ministry, and its form of church leadership--and seek to conform all that we say and do in light of New Testament patterns. As John Stott has said: "The hallmark of an authentic evangelicalism is not the uncritical repetition of old traditions, but the willingness to submit every tradition, however ancient, to fresh Biblical scrutiny and, if necessary, reform" ("Basic Stott," Christianity Today [Jan. 8, 1996]).