



Why Are We Struggling to Stay Engaged?

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My name is David Styles. I'm a member of the Shelburne ecclesia in Amaranth, Ontario. If you want to know where Amaranth, Ontario is, you'll have to Google it.

This article is about our Sunday morning format and how we can address some of the issues around making it a more engaging, inclusive, and important part of our week. For all of us who are committed Christians there is really nothing more important than coming together as an ecclesia to remember the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. However, we do have some challenges. These are challenges that a lot of faith-based communities are facing today, and I think that as responsible Christians, we need to have a good, long hard look at how we worship on a Sunday morning.

I'll give you a little bit of background about myself. I was born in Texas. When I was five years old, my parents relocated to the Detroit area where my dad was from, and I spent my childhood in the Detroit area. Thirty-five years ago, I moved to Ontario, and have been a member of the Shelburne ecclesia ever since.

I have had a lot of exposure to ecclesial life. During my childhood, I spent quite a bit of time in the Austin, Texas area. I've traveled extensively in our community, visiting ecclesias on a Sunday morning all over the world. Because of this background, I think I have a reasonable grasp and appreciation of how things are in this regard in our community today.

One of the challenges that I've observed (as have many in our community) is whether our Sunday morning worship become too structured, too rigid, too formal, and perhaps no longer serving the needs of our community.

I think we need to be careful when we address this subject. Clearly, coming together and remembering the Lord's death and resurrection isn't about entertainment. It isn't about keeping

us all engaged as we might seek to engage a kindergarten class. We're not children, we're adults, and we need to respond to this challenge in an adult-like manner. Nonetheless, there are things I think that we need to speak to in this respect.

One of the things that is very clear in the scriptures (I think we need to all agree to this) is that we need to have a communal life. Discipleship is not a solo venture. That has certainly been experimented with over the centuries, and even today many feel that the best way to serve Jesus and God is to isolate from everyone else. It gave rise to monastic movements in the early church era, and continues to attract certain individuals. But the Bible does not seem to support that approach. From the earliest chapters of Genesis through to the end of Revelation, the Bible is full of examples of believers coming together congregationally. Assembling together.

Hebrews 10 is quite emphatic on this point where it speaks to the fact that we ought not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together.

Let us hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up, meeting together as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another and all the more as you see the day approaching. (Heb 10:23)

I don't think it's necessarily a choice as far as our discipleship is concerned as to whether we come together. We need to be in each other's company.

Growing up in the Detroit area, there were things that were really well done. We had a very vibrant mid-week Bible class where we studied the Bible. We picked a book and we studied it chapter by chapter. The presentations were given by the brethren, but we had good and meaningful discussions afterwards. And I was very blessed to have a very vibrant young people's program. There was a junior CYC program, which began, I believe around 11-12 years old. And then when we were 15, we graduated to the senior youth group program, which was really great in that it was quite autonomous. There were a few couples who oversaw what we did, but the young people ran it. And it was engaging. It was fun. It really was very helpful to me during my formative years to keep me engaged.

In my opinion, those were things that were well done in the Detroit area. But the Sunday morning service was very traditional, very staid, very formal, and there were a lot of rules attached to who could serve on the platform. There were rules in regards to dress, rules in

regards to facial hair, and rules in regards to conduct and behavior as to whether you were permitted to serve in any capacity, whether it was prayer or reading.

That's what I grew up with. But over time, I came to appreciate that that might not have been an appropriate reflection of first century precedent and practice. And, as we do consider ourselves to be a revival of first century Apostolic Christianity, I think it's very important that we do our utmost to follow those precedents.

Pros and Cons

Now as to our current Sunday morning format, which is traditionally practiced by a significant percentage of our community today, I think there are pros and cons. The pros for many of us are that it's predictable. We know what to expect on a Sunday morning. It's the same format. It's the same way of doing things. There are certain expectations, which we're all familiar with. It can make for a very stable and reassuring experience that when we come, there're no surprises. We have a certain expectation that's been consistent over decades and generations. And for many of us that can be a comforting thing. It can also speak to the fact that we are not an excessively changeable community. We are not bending to every movement, whim, suggestion, or current fad. We're not a fad chaser type of group, which is not a bad thing.

Some would argue that the traditional format appeals to the majority of Christadelphians today. And in comparison with many other mainstream churches, it is inclusive and involving. It involves far more members than what you might find in other Christian communities. In fact, 150 years ago, what the Christadelphians did and how they worshiped was groundbreaking. It was cutting edge. It was different. We are a lay community. No one is paid. We volunteer. And whatever background, whatever degree of education we have, if we're willing and competent and able, we're able to participate quite fully. And that's a wonderful thing and something we need to maintain and hold onto.

There's also some cons. Just as it might be stable and reassuring for some, it can be repetitive for others, repetitive to the point of being boring. Not inspirational. The sameness becomes tedious and non-engaging.

Another problem that many of us have confronted is that there doesn't appear to be any room for innovation or change. Instead, Sunday mornings are quite unyielding and inflexible. You get the sense that even the most innocent suggestions are met with upset, consternation, and

excessive concern. Clearly, our format is not going to be appealing to everyone, and it is important that we are aware of other people's sensitivities and how they react to how we do things. That's not something we should be insensitive to.

For many of us, there's been a sense of a lack of involvement from the entire ecclesia. And unfortunately over time, there has been a trend at least in some parts of the brotherhood to limit the participation, not only based on things like dress and appearance and so forth, but the way we study the Bible, the kinds of things we might include in our talks. Things can start getting censored in an inappropriate sort of way, and that's not a good thing.

And in terms of the involvement of all of our members, for many of us we've come to appreciate that there needs to be greater flexibility and inclusiveness in our approach to our Sunday morning service.

Memorials

I think it is very important to establish what the memorials are and what they're not, because when we generate an attitude based on what they're not, it can lead to ways of doing things which become inappropriate. What I mean by that is that the memorials are not a sacrament or a Holy Act deserving of special merit. That's not what they are. This was above all an extremely simple act. There is nothing inherently righteous about participating in this act. And while we would emphasize — I would emphasize — the importance of assembling together (and it is certainly an integral part of our Christian walk) it cannot be elevated to a place where it ought not to be. It is not a special time of forgiveness. Nor is it necessarily a special time for confession of our sins. Nor do we create some kind of special connection to God and Jesus on a Sunday morning when we participate in a Memorial meeting. Our presence with the Father and with the Son is something that we are privileged to enjoy every day of the week. When we come together as an ecclesia to break bread, we're not necessarily any closer than we were the day before, or the night before.

So what is the memorial? What are we doing?

Well, it's a remembrance. That's what Jesus described it as. And he uses a word, not that common in the new Testament at all. It's *anamnesis*. It means to call to mind again. So the function of coming together as an ecclesia, breaking bread, and remembering the Lord's death

and resurrection is intended to be a repetitive activity with the goal of bringing into our mind what it was the Lord did for us.

The memorial is also a collective activity. This is a communal activity. It's marked by a meal in the New Testament, as we understand from when Paul addresses this issue in 1 Corinthians 11. It was something that seems to have occurred at least once a week. Clearly, when Jesus established it in the gospel accounts, it was "as often as you do this, you do this in remembrance of me."

We talk about it being a communal, collective activity, but very often when I am not able to make it to meeting I break bread on my own. Or if it's just Mary and I at home, we do it on our own. In some respects, that's not exactly the point of breaking bread. It was intended as something we do with one another. And without getting into all the various aspects of this, as you know, Paul addresses at length what was going on in Corinth. All very helpful words for ourselves. The memorial is not a solo activity. It is a group activity.

Suggestions for Change

So what can we do to make the breaking of bread in the memorials more engaging, more inclusive? What can we do to reach out to our disenchanted brothers and sisters who are feeling disengaged?

One thing I think is very important is to be collaborative. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul talks at length about a lot of these concerns, using the analogy of the body.

The eye cannot say to the hand, I don't need you. And the head cannot say to the feet, I don't need you on the contrary. Those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable in the parts that we think are less honorable. We treat with special honor.
(1Cor 12:21)

He goes on to talk about how the human body has some comely parts and uncomely parts, yet all are equally essential. And that was a priority from the outset in our community, that we were one body, that there was no one greater than or lesser than. Paul's description here would reinforce that point. As a community we need to work together and exercise mutual respect and love. Collaboration works when those things are in place. And it's vital to the success of our communal life.

I mentioned earlier the importance of following New Testament precedent. When we look in the New Testament at the different activities that were part and parcel of breaking bread together, these were engaging activities. There was discussion. There were meals. There were family-friendly activities. Very often they met in homes.

In many respects we have moved away from a lot of these things. In my opinion (and I am suggesting) we moved too far away. In many respects, we have adopted a form that many other churchgoers from other churches would be very comfortable with — the formality and the ritual that we attach to breaking bread. That was not how it began.

I think one of our problems is that when Paul admonishes the Corinthians to do things decently in an order, we may see this as a green light to be completely ordered and completely decent to the exclusion of completely appropriate activities. And those activities were discussion, engagement, and were sometimes perceived as raucous activities. But that's something I'm suggesting we need to engage with more, be more comfortable with, and allow to be part of our Sunday morning experience.

Another interesting thing in the New Testament is that personal testimonials were used a lot. It's particularly true of Paul. He talks at length about what happened to him, the road to Damascus, the experiences he had as a missionary, the experiences he had with different ecclesias and different brothers and sisters. Those were an important part of Paul's way of reaching out to the brothers and sisters he had taught the truth to.

Unfortunately, that's something I think we've stayed away from. We sometimes consider it potentially self-aggrandizing or self-absorbed. But in fact, those are things that are important for us to share, and to hear about. Things like how we came to a knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ, and what was pivotal in our lives so that we saw a need to be baptized. Those are important things to include in the time we get together to share and to remember the Lord's death and resurrection.

Another thing is that many ecclesias have become very adept at including more music, more praise, more song. Again, we turn to scriptures and find Paul saying that these are important parts of sharing and worshiping together,

Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is, do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery instead be filled with the spirit, speaking to one another with Psalms,, hymns and songs from the spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the

Lord, always giving thanks to God, the father for everything in the name of the Lord, Jesus Christ. (Eph 5:17–20)

I completely appreciate the challenge many of us have when trying to adopt ways that are different to what we grew up with. It took me a long time to develop a level of comfort that would allow me to move past what I was used to.

One of the arguments that would be brought up over and over again is that, “This is what evangelicals or Pentecostals do. This is the kind of church service they would conduct, where everything is all about the music and the swaying, and it almost seems debauched in that they’re just almost having too good a time.”

I understand that we have to be governed by scripture and by what we’re told in the New Testament (and indeed the entire Bible). And one of the concerns we have is that the spirit that we’re filled with is the spirit of the Lord, Jesus Christ — not our own spirit, mastering, or masquerading as some special spirit utterance. That’s not appropriate. But it is fully and completely appropriate for all of us to be filled with the spirit in its joyous manifestation. In fact, it’s an imperative that we’re filled with the spirit of Christ. And that spirit can find expression in song, in Psalms, in music. It always has been.

If we looked at congregate settings in the Old Testament, the variety of things that faithful men and women did to worship and to engage one another communally absolutely covered the entire spectrum of human behavior. They were inclusive. They involved entire families, the entire tribe, the entire nation. They were wonderful things. And as a community, brothers and sisters, friends, we need to rise to this challenge and continue to be groundbreaking and cutting edge in the way we worship the Lord Jesus Christ in our heavenly father on a Sunday morning.

Thank you very much.