

## Paul's Free "Tents for Humanity" #2

What is effective in reaching people with the gospel in one age and culture may not fit the next one. The gospel does not change but society does. To try to reach the people in our country today by the methods that were (somewhat) effective in my youth is foolish. Rather than decrying change, we should be wisely seeking the most effective methods of evangelism and edification. I do not propose to have all the answers, but let us explore areas where modifications may be helpful.

Let's begin with assemblies and organized activity where we have centered our focus. We have tended to make "working for the Lord" mean working in the organized assemblies which meet especially on Sundays. And "giving to the Lord" means putting money in the weekly collection to pay for the organized activity in maintaining the organization. Most every Sunday we hear someone speak of "giving back a portion of what God has given you" in a sadly misguided expression.

Whether you meet with five, fifty, five hundred, or five thousand, there is nothing in Scripture that legislates that you should meet every week, that all must meet at the same time, or that the meetings should be worship services involving certain rituals to be kept on Sunday and only on Sunday. The frequency and length of gatherings are not even suggested. By a series of assumptions, however, we have tended to design a pattern into which we have fit "five acts of worship" as a legally binding dogma. Most of what defines us as a separate body is based on assumptions as to what we can or must do in assemblies. A wee bit out of focus, would you say?

Our proof-text for assemblies has been Hebrews 10:23-25: *"Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near."*

Let's look at that for a moment. The Jewish resistance of Rome was drawing persecution. The **Day** of God's vengeance against Israel in A.D. 70 was fast approaching with some chastening of his son, Israel, being felt by disciples already. Because it was such a trying time, they would need to stick together for mutual encouragement and strength gained through personal contact. They needed one another, so they were exhorted not to neglect meetings for encouragement.

Now, how do you translate that? Did it call for meetings of the whole church together each and every Sunday to perform five acts of worship? That would be a total assumption. Yet we have tended to stuff that into a ritualistic worship service template when nothing of that sort is indicated in the text. The text does not indicate when, where, or how often to meet, or what to do when they met except to encourage one another. This could be done in neighborly gatherings in homes, in community gatherings, or assemblies on a wider scale. All this was left to their practical judgment.

No one was instructed to meet to fulfill some supposed legal requirement to meet, yet that has been drilled into so many of us. The exhortation “*Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together*” (KJV) has actually been quoted as a dogmatic negative command, “**Forsake not the assembly**” thus making failure to assemble one time a sin of forsaking **the assembly**. Though we are facing no trials of persecution, we meet because we love each other and want to encourage and strengthen each other. The methods and procedures are left to our judgment and ability to facilitate.

During the time of recorded new covenant history, disciples did not have Bibles as we do. The Old Testament scriptures were available but limited for personal use. Most disciples had no copies of scriptures and could not have read them if they were available. They had to go where they could hear inspired men or those who had been specially taught. Thus, the monologue was the method of public teaching. We have clung to that ancient pulpitering method though it is one of the least effective methods of teaching.

Now, every interested person has access to Bibles, study helps, commentaries, books and writings on every subject, radio, television, tapes, videos, mail, and telephones. These methods eliminate the necessity of having to “go to church” to gain spiritual education and for evangelism also. Because businesses still find public advertising profitable, individuals and groups may do well to learn better evangelistic methods from them.

Also, now we are in the computer age. Our kids make much use of computers. They are spreading through the world population. Already we can find information on just about any subject of interest. An individual or church can provide unlimited instruction by the simple, inexpensive operation of a web site. One person can operate it from his/her own home. I can testify to the expansive influence of providing materials world-wide by the internet for last month (February) my site received a **daily** average of 5,237 hits from 1,197 visitors. Randy has put my five “FREE” books in PDF about two weeks ago. Already they are receiving a daily average of 30 hits for downloading. There are skilled persons in your congregation, no doubt, who would be pleased to operate such a web site.

It is recognized that the personal connection is minimal in internet study, but that also allows the student to study non-defensively. At the same time, I receive communications from many students who have more personal questions.

A congregation can offer much more personal contact. It can provide **volunteer teachers** who will meet with the student for tutoring. It can offer the service of **volunteer counselors** for various personal problems like addiction, marriage and family, health, bereavement, ageing, emotional disorders, financial stress, doubts and skepticism, and all other concerns of individuals and families. These matters might never be touched on from the impersonal pulpit and, besides, the preacher could hardly be qualified to offer help on all those matters.

All of these services could be coordinated by one or a few volunteers from his/her home or from a store-front, or an office in a “church building.” This “office” could offer a wide selection of books, commentaries, study materials, videos, materials for youth and children, etc. covering all facets of the disciples’ needs, all made available at no charge. Printed or email sendouts could

be utilized constantly. Neighborhood pastors could keep in touch with those near them. Where money would be needed, it would be provided specifically by those who compose the assembly. A student would need self-motivation to gain this sort of education but individual initiative is required in all aspects of successful endeavor – even to dutifully “go to church”.

In all of this there has been a minimal amount of personal association. Though we may gain knowledge in impersonal study without assemblies as were needed in former times, we still need face-to-face associations. How much? That is left to our discretion. Just for a thought, how about everyone in the area meeting once each month in a four hour session of visiting, eating together, reporting, dealing with mutual concerns, testifying, instructing, singing, communing, praying, and encouraging. No investment in property would be necessary.

This might serve well whether it is an association of fifty or five thousand disciples, whether they own a building or not, and no professionals are needed. If weekly assemblies are deemed best, five thousand could meet in one modest structure by beginning services on Saturday and scheduling meetings through most of Sunday.

Many traditional congregations are finding home group meetings to be helpful but they still continue to make them a function of the structure where most of the resources are spent on church property and professional employees.

Since these things being discussed fall into the realm of judgment, I am not making a “right-or-wrong” list. I am questioning the wisdom and practicality of them in search for more effective methods. Paul did not consider it best to make tents in every place he preached.

Let’s pause for a week. If we can find the dropped thread of these thoughts next week, we will pick it up then and add more to them. My thoughts have followed no outline, but my tracks are more like those of a snake crossing loose sand. []

(Cecil Hook; March 2007)

**OUR ROOTS**: With increased discussion of unity in our movement, more of you have ordered “*Our Heritage of Unity and Fellowship*” and I am receiving delightful responses from readers. It has been “a revelation” to them of our history of which they had not been aware. Some have ordered multiple copies.

This 350-page compilation of writings of Carl Ketcherside and Leroy Garrett tells the story of the Stone-Campbell Movement – its noble aims, its tragic misdirection bringing defeating divisions, and the necessary route back to regaining our heritage of unity and fellowship.

A local Presbyterian friend, in order to learn more about us, bought all of my books. He gave high praise for “Our Heritage,” expressed admiration for the original aims of our movement, says he would be pleased to be called a Campbellite, and ordered extra copies of it to pass along. You should be impressed, also.

Maybe it has been the \$16.00 price that has kept you from buying the book so I am “giving” you \$5.00 to read it by cutting the price to **\$11.00** (plus \$1.75 for mailing). This offer ends April 30.

Order from me at 905 Forest Canyon Cove, Round Rock TX 78664.