

mutual edification-

"The practice of encouraging and utilizing all qualified male members of a congregation in the public preaching and teaching."

INTRODUCTION

"Mutual edification" is a new concept to many. Many do not realize that its practice can be traced back to the first century, both through Scripture and in history. Times have changed--churches have changed. "Mutual edification" churches of Christ, therefore, find themselves in the difficult position of attempting to encourage the restoration of a practice that many do not know was lost. And, as a result, "mutual edification" sounds progressive, not primitive, and brethren are doubtful and guarded. Objections are raised. If restoration of New Testament "mutual edification" is ever to be realized, these objections will need to be addressed.

This tract is a brief attempt to begin doing just that:

OBJECTION #1

It can be proven that there were located pulpit preachers/ministers in the New Testament church. Paul was in Ephesus three years (Acts 20:31), and Timothy "remained in Ephesus" (1 Timothy 1:3) to "[p]reach the word" (2 Timothy 4:2). These men were the preachers/ministers of that congregation during their stays.

That Paul and Timothy each remained in Ephesus for a lengthy time is indisputable. That they preached the word while there is equally

indisputable. But to say that they served as the pulpit preachers/ministers of that congregation is to assert without evidence.

Acts 20 clearly reveals that Paul taught the Ephesian brethren "publicly and from house to house" (vs. 20), but it **does not say he did this to the exclusion of others**. Granted, it is possible, even likely, that he did a majority of the preaching and teaching *in the beginning*, as the new Christians needed to be taught, but that would not have been his intention for their future. Employing a man to be the resident edifier, or permitting one man to be such when others could (and should) share in the work, was a concept entirely foreign to the apostle. Paul's practice and teaching elsewhere demands that conclusion.

While in Antioch, he prophesied with **four other men** (Acts 13:1), and preached and taught "with **many others** also" (Acts 15:35). He commanded the Roman brethren for being able to "**admonish one another**" (Romans 15:14), and commanded the Corinthian brethren to keep up their mutual edification meetings by permitting **two or three** tongue-speakers (1 Corinthians 14:27) and **two or three** prophets to participate in the meetings (1 Corinthians 14:29). And to a maturing Ephesian church he wrote that "the **whole body**, joined and knit together by what **every joint** supplies, according to the effective working by which **every part** does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love" (Ephesians 4:16). The evidence says that Paul believed in a plurality of participants when it came to teaching, preaching, admonishing, and edifying in the assembly.

As for Timothy, Scripture is plain that he remained at Ephesus to "charge some that **they teach** no other doctrine" (1 Timothy 1:3). He was there to help **them** learn how to teach, not to do the teaching for them. His job, according to Paul, was to "commit [the things he'd heard from Paul] to **faithful men who will be able to teach** others also" (2 Timothy 2:2). Paul had helped start the congregation, and Timothy was going to help develop the congregation. He wasn't filling a job, but was working himself out of a job. He was working himself out by working others in. (aside:

It is worthy of note that Timothy was to appoint men as bishops at Ephesus who were *already* "able to teach" (1 Timothy 3:2), indicating they'd had plenty of previous practice as instructors.)

No, we don't see a pulpit minister in either Paul or Timothy. Rather, we see them both working to create an environment where brethren would share the responsibility of teaching and preaching, and grow thereby. That was the expectation among the New Testament churches. Brethren would be participants, not spectators. Interestingly, history bolsters our case.

Historians of divergent religious affiliations testify together that the practice of having one man, or a select group of men, preach in a congregation was developed during the second century. With total agreement, they state that the apostolic church permitted and practiced the involvement of a plurality of participants:

Philip Schaff, in his *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 2, writes:

"Preaching was at first free to every member who had the gift of public speaking, but was gradually confined as an exclusive privilege of the clergy, and especially the bishop" (p. 225).

A.H. Newman, D.D., LL.D. in his *Manual of Church History*, states:

"The participation in worship was not confined to the official members, but to every male member it was permitted to utter his apprehension of truth" (p. 141).

Thomas M. Lindsay, D.D., in his *The Church and the Ministry in the Early Centuries*, writes concerning 1 Corinthians 14:26-31:

"What cannot fail to strike us in this picture is the untrammeled liberty to worship, the possibility of every male member of the congregation taking part in the prayers and exhortations..." (p. 48).

Dr. Augustus Neander's, in his first volume of *Church History*, comments:

"The edification...was the common work of all. Even the edification by the word was not assigned exclusively to one individual" (p.251).

OBJECTION #2

The mutual edification service described in 1 Corinthians 14:27-31 is not a directive for modern-day assemblies of the saints. This passage describes how miraculous gifts were to be exercised in the first century church. In the absence of miraculous gifts, the instructions are no longer applicable.

To a great extent, this is true. Our circumstances, with respect to miraculous gifts, are substantially different from those that prevailed in the first century church, and Paul's instructions clearly concerned their unique, and temporary, circumstances. Tongue-speaking and prophesying are not a part of our assemblies. Logically, then, neither are the rules governing their use (Where there is no traffic, there is no reason for traffic laws.). None of this undermines a legitimate appeal to 1 Corinthians 14, however.

We appeal not so much to Corinth's specific practice (nor the rules governing it), but to the *principle* expressly communicated by their state-of-affairs, namely, that God desires a *plurality* of participants, a *multiplicity* of ministers. How do we know? God inspired numerous persons at Corinth! God gave gifts to many, *knowing full well that by doing so confusion and chaos (as a result of abuse) would arise*. Why did He do this? Why didn't He just inspire the most talented man, and avoid these potential problems? Why didn't

He just inspire the least talented man in order to manifest His glory, and thereby create an environment where there could be no "competition"? After all, "God is not the author of confusion..." (1 Corinthians 14:33). Why did He inspire so many? Obviously, He wanted more than one member edifying the group. That was true concerning the exercise of supernatural gifts, and it stands to reason that it would also be true of the exercise of natural gifts.

We do not rely on reason alone, however. The case for mutual edification in no way rests solely upon an appeal to the implied principle of 1 Corinthians 14. Various passages teach that God wanted several involved in the teaching, preaching, admonishing, edifying, and exhorting (Acts 15:30-35; Romans 15:14; 1 Timothy 1:3; 2 Timothy 2:2).

OBJECTION #3

Mutual edification puts unqualified men in teaching roles, and thereby weakens the church.

If a congregation that practices mutual edification has unqualified men standing before the group, it is not the fault of the system—it is the fault of those "practicing" the system. Paul told the Roman brethren, "Now I myself am confident concerning you, my brethren, that you also are full of goodness, **filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another**" (Romans 15:14). To the Colossian church, he wrote: "**Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another...**" (Colossians 3:16). In both places, he taught with clarity that knowledge (as well as goodness and wisdom) is required in one who would admonish and/or teach his brethren. So long as a congregation practicing mutual ministry adheres to these stipulations (and many do), working God's plan, God's plan works! Such mutual edification, "by which every part does its share, **causes growth** of the body for the edifying of itself in love" (Ephesians 4:16).

OBJECTION #4

Mutual edification can still take place with a "preacher." Some brothers are permitted to preach occasionally on Sunday evenings.

At first, this objection could lead one to think that there might be gradations of mutual edification. One might begin to entertain the notion that how far a congregation has to go in involving its male members is a matter of liberty, that it falls under the guise of "congregational autonomy," and that there's a great deal of latitude so long as the "preacher" shares the pulpit once-in-a-while. As persuasive, or plausible, as that may sound at first, it becomes problematic when carefully scrutinized.

First, one has to contend with the fact that the mutual edification we read about in the New Testament **took place during the Lord's Day assembly**, not during some other agreed-upon gathering time. So far as we know, Corinth was meeting regularly only on the first day of the week (1 Corinthians 16:1-2). This was the occasion they observed the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:20-33), and on this same occasion they enjoyed the edifying efforts of many (1 Corinthians 14:26-32).

Second, even in the above scenario, there remains a focus on "one man," as opposed to the "**one another**" of Scripture (1 Thessalonians 5:11; Hebrews 10:24-25; 1 Peter 4:10). The participation of members has been made the exception, rather than the rule. Neither Scripture, nor first century history, ever speaks of such organization with respect to the edification of the church. The system of the pulpit preacher/minister, or anything remotely like it, is wholly unknown until the second century, after the death of the apostles.

"Mutual Edification":

Answering Objections

by

John Morris

Church of Christ
Lawrence, KS
201 North Michigan
Lawrence, KS 66044
(785) 838-9795
<http://www.lawrencecoc.org>