

Why We Share Concerns and Joys
Romans 12:15, Galatians 6:2

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There is a reason we come together for worship. Of course we could experience some sense of God's grandeur out on a fishing boat on Sunday morning. We could hear a sermon on television or read our Bibles quietly at home. But Christian worship is about gathering with other believers to experience being the body of Christ; it's about responding not only to the call to love God with all that we are, but to do so in the context of loving one another. The New Testament word *koinonia* does not only mean "fellowship;" it means communion, and it means shared being, sharing life together.

That's why in most American Baptist churches—and in a good many Congregational and Unitarian churches—setting aside time in worship for sharing our joys and concerns is a cherished part of the liturgy. In Southern Baptist and other evangelical churches, it's not very common—first because it's too uncontrolled, and second because worship is understood as an evangelistic outreach to unbelievers. Why would you want to share our mess with them? In "high" churches, you might be allowed to name a person who needs prayer, but no one's going to allow you to stand up and give a little talk. But in our churches, it's pretty much whatever you want to share before the pastoral prayer.

Not everybody likes this, of course. Some people see it as an unnecessary delay that keeps us from getting out at 11:00—although I know most of you blame the sermon! Other people worry about the unpredictability of it; you never know what someone might say. But for a good many people it may be the most important part of the service. It may be disruptive, but it may be the one time in the service the Holy Spirit gets a chance to disrupt our worship.

I think I'm guilty of treating the sharing time as something tacked on to the service. I do think we need some guidelines: no announcements you forgot to get in the bulletin, no politics, no personal attacks, no long speeches. But the reality is that during the sharing time we are *doing church* more authentically than at any time during worship. We are being a *koinonia*. We are being Christ to one another. We are doing what the apostle Paul told the early church to do. In Romans 12:15 he said "Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep." In Galatians 6:2 he said, "Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ."

Maybe we need to conceive sharing concerns and joys more spiritually. It is a spiritual practice, not just the sharing of gossip or information. It is the sharing of burdens and joys and sorrows with one another as we prepare to take them to the throne of grace. It is a mini Quaker service, where each person has to sit in silence and wonder "Does God want me to say something?" It could be a response to the sermon or a song. It could be something you've been thinking about all morning so that you couldn't pay attention to a thing—you just need to get it off your chest. It could be that thing just below the surface that is threatening to bring you to tears. It could be something so wonderful or funny that you are about to burst. Maybe the Spirit is telling you to say something encouraging to someone else or to thank someone for a bit of ministry that goes unnoticed. Maybe you know it's the Spirit when you just can't sit still and you have to get up and say something.

When I went to the Theologians' Conference at the American Baptist Biennial, one of the many papers I heard presented in breakout groups was called "Cultivating Attentiveness to the Spirit through the Practice of Concerns and Celebrations" (by Jennifer Wilkins Davidson, PhD). The presenter's message was that this is a significant rite in our liturgy, one that breaks down the distance between the

primary theology of major biblical themes and the secondary theology of how we live the Christian life in the everyday. It also has the value, from the Baptist perspective, that it gives the congregation a voice, so that the theology expressed in worship is not just the pastor's. What gets reflected, she said, is a theology that is "collegial, provisional, local, lived, and multivocal."

When you share your concerns and joys you bring into worship the real world of your lives, even if I have not connected with them in the sermon. You tell us what is going on in your family that worries or excites you, sharing both burdens and blessings. You express the faith that says we ought to pray about crises in the world and on our island. You trust God to bring healing and comfort to those who are ill or dying. Is this a distraction from worship? Or is this an act of worship? I want to argue for the latter.

If we come into worship looking for God to speak, God will speak to us. He may speak through the Scriptures, or through the songs, or through the sermon. But he may also speak through our neighbors as we share our common life in Christ. Yes, I'm trying to listen to the Spirit as I prepare to preach, but I have no doubt that the Spirit can lay something on your heart as well. If we believe, as we claim, in the priesthood of all believers, and that the Spirit is given to every Christian, then we ought to allow a chance for you to share the word of testimony or hope or anguish that has been laid on your heart.

In Dr. Davidson's theological paper, she quoted from interviews with church members whom she asked to describe their experience of what they call "Concerns and Celebrations." I want you to listen to one of those voices:

I think what happened in so many instances was the messiness of our humanity was brought into worship. Now most worship is pretty sanitized. You know, by the time we get in there and out of there, it is pretty well predictable and controlled.

And this was a moment of real messiness. And messiness that essentially invited us to *sit with* this messiness. To *be with*, to be *present* in this messiness. And to, in some sense then, as we hold this before God to struggle with *what do we do?* I mean what seemed so clear as the *right* thing all of a sudden, we see it in a much more complicated way and we are invited into looking at it with different eyes. And hearing it with different ears.

Even as I'm hearing that I'm thinking, *golly! Gee whiz! Holy moly! That's pretty cool!*

And I think that part of what was just so precious to me about that is that on a weekly basis worship was not sanitized. It was not made to fit into a time frame. It was not controlled. And that this conversation with God invited all of this stuff to be there.

I agree with this guy that the messiness is a sign that real humanity is breaking into worship, and a sign of the Holy Spirit's presence. I'm not advocating for becoming a Quaker service on one hand, or a Pentecostal service on the other, but for placing value on sharing life together as something that builds up the church and allows the Spirit to speak.

Paul makes a connection in Romans 12 between the idea that the church is like the human body made up of a variety of parts, and the ethical commands to show honor to one another, to take care of one another, to live in harmony, and to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. He says in a similar passage in 1 Corinthians 12:26 that if one body part suffers, the whole body suffers. If your toe hurts, *you* hurt—your whole self, not just one part. Paul also says that of one part of your body is honored—if your legs are honored because you won a race, say—your whole body is honored. *You* are honored as a whole person. In the same way, if one member of the church is hurting, we all hurt. If one member has an achievement or is praised in the community, we are all praised. This is not a contest. There is no pecking order. We are a body, made up of multiple organs and systems that function for different purposes and by differing logic, but all dependent on each other in order for the body to

thrive. If the body thrives, all the organs thrive, and vice versa. When we share our worries and our joys, we make the body of Christ a reality.

In Galatians 6, Paul says that if someone in the body really messes up—if they are caught in a scandal that might reflect on the body—our response should not be to cut them off or to criticize them. Instead, Paul says, “you who are led by the Spirit should *restore* that person to the fellowship in a spirit of gentleness.” Then he lays down a general principle for life in the Christian community: “Bear one another’s burdens; when you do that you are fulfilling the law of Christ, which is to love your neighbor as yourself.”

We live in a society which says, for the most part, that each person must bear his own burden. Increasingly we are resistant to the idea that we are our brother’s keeper. Let him get a job. Let him go back where he came from. Let him get treatment. It’s not my problem. But the Jesus way is to see your neighbor’s burdens as your own—when it is a stranger beside the road to Jericho, and when it is a church member who shares the pew with you. This is why in the book of Acts the first church members brought their property to the church—not just for the annual fair, but year-round—so that the needs of the poor in the church could be met, because their burdens were everybody’s burdens.

You probably know about Albert Schweitzer, who was first a great organist and Bach scholar, then a great New Testament scholar, and then in midlife went to medical school so that he could help the neediest people in central Africa. An American professor went to visit Dr. Schweitzer when he was 85 years old and still working in his hospital. One day the American and Schweitzer were walking up a hill when suddenly the good doctor strode across the hill to where an African woman was struggling with a huge armload of wood for her cook fire. He took the whole load of wood and carried it up the hill. When they all got to the top of the hill, the American asked Schweitzer why he did things like that, given the heat and his age. Albert Schweitzer looked at him and pointed to the woman and said simply, “No one should ever have to carry a burden like that alone.”

Some of you have come here with burdens you should not have to carry alone. The Lord asks you to cast your burdens on him. But he also asks you to share your burdens with your fellow church members so that they can fulfill the law of Christ. Let us bear your burden for a while. Let us help you stand. We are not here to fix you or your problem, but to stand with you when the load is heavy. A couple of days after the tornadoes in Moore, Oklahoma, megachurch pastor Rick Warren—who had recently lost a son to suicide—sent this tweet to his followers: “In deep pain, people don’t need logic, advice, encouragement, or even Scripture. They just need you to show up and shut up.” From personal experience, I can say *Amen*.

When we share the Lord’s Supper—as we did last Sunday—we reenact the Passover meal that Jesus shared with his disciples before he went to the cross. In the Passover they break the bread which is called “the bread of affliction” because it reminds us of our suffering in Egypt. Then they drink the cup of wine which is called “the cup of salvation” because it celebrates our freedom. For us as Christians, both sorrow and salvation come through the body and blood of Jesus, who paid the price for our freedom.

I think it is a good practice to omit the time of sharing concerns and joys on Communion Sundays in the interest of time. We are establishing *koinonia* by means of nonverbal signs and joining hands to sing “Blest Be the Tie.” But I want you to think about this: On the other Sundays of the month, our time of sharing *is* our communion. As we break the bread on first Sundays, we share our own brokenness on other Sundays. As we share the cup on first Sundays, we share the joy of salvation in words on other Sundays.

Nothing can do more to transform us from a society to a church than sharing our brokenness with one another, getting real about where we hurt, where we doubt, where we need help. We are not a club

for people who have their act together. We are a body of forgiven people, messed up people who have acknowledged their brokenness. I know it's scary to be honest on this island. You wonder if there ought to be a Miranda warning before prayer time: "Anything you say can and will be used against you." So we have to be careful that we do not use the sharing time to spread gossip, and that when we share our failures and tragedies no one passes judgment or spreads the news with delight. But we will never experience the reality of the Spirit and the reality of Christ living in us if we do not get real about what is going on—or not going on—in our lives. We will never experience what it means to be one in the Spirit if we keep secrets from one another.

It cannot be a secret that I stand before you as a broken man today. I am in deep pain because my father is dying. I am in pain because I have withstood a fierce attack this week by a member who wants me off the island. But if God is not God in the midst of that, if Jesus is not enough when I am hurting, then I have nothing to say to you. And if we cannot share with one another words of vulnerability and words of testimony, then we have nothing to offer the world.