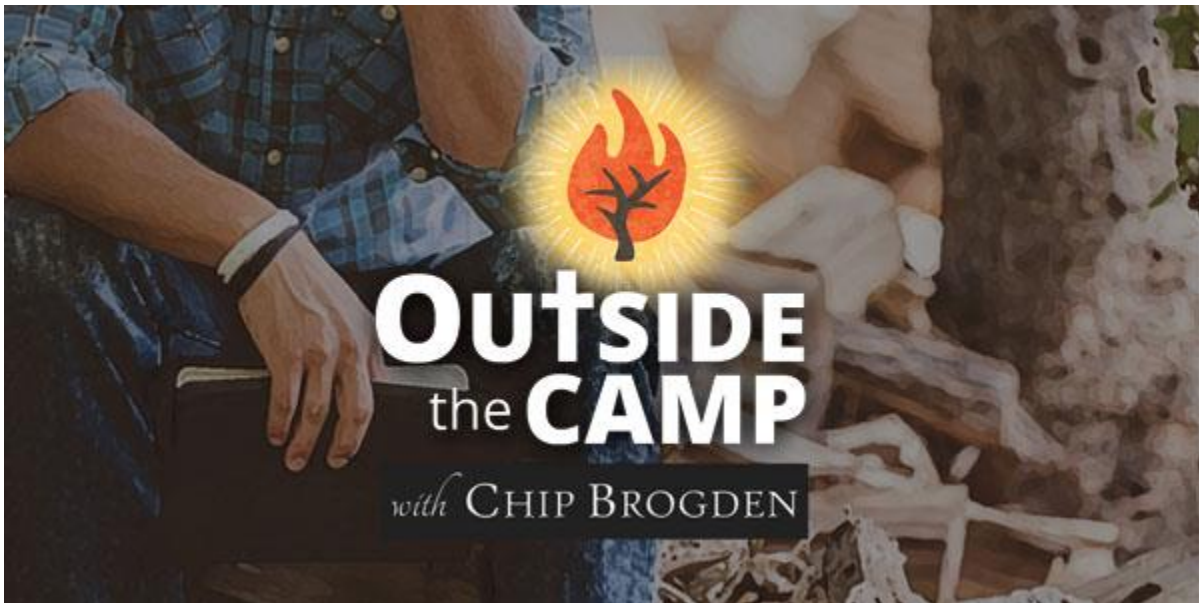


TRANSCRIPT

OUTSIDE THE CAMP WITH CHIP BROGDEN



EPISODE 7: Simple Gatherings

Audio File Location:

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ANNOUNCER: Welcome to this edition of Outside the Camp with author and teacher Chip Brogden. Helping you discover the freedom and joy of a Christ-centered faith that is based on relationship, not religion. And now, with today's message, here's Chip Brogden.

CHIP: Jesus said in Matthew 18:20, "Wherever two or three are gathered together in My Name, there I am in the midst of them." Thank the Lord that He did not say two or three thousand, or two or three hundred, or even two or three dozen. Just two or three people! It seems the carnal man is really excited about great numbers. When we think of God doing great things or exciting things in the earth we automatically imagine and assume

that if something is truly “great” then it must involve millions of people, or large crowds. Not so. In fact, I believe that the larger the crowd, the harder it is to see Jesus. The more people are involved, the more error and deception are involved. People begin to focus on people instead of the Lord. And we all know that the Institutional Church has long been fascinated by numbers – so fascinated that they put the numbers up on the wall and tell you so many attended today, so many attended this time last year. We count the people just like we count the money, and the more people the better and more prosperous the church thinks it is.

All I’m saying is that Jesus is in the midst of two or three. For all the talk about “gathering together” it really isn’t that difficult, if you just eliminate from your mind the old institutional obsession with large numbers. Jesus is not so interested in numbers. He is very non-specific – He says, two or three. Could be as little as two. Could be as many as three. Just two or three. Very small. Very insignificant in terms of what we have come to expect a “gathering” is supposed to look like. Jesus says He is in the midst of as few as two or three who are gathered together in His Name. I just think that is very liberating. Very freeing, that we do not have to gather dozens or hundreds or thousands of people together and put them in a box. You can call the box a church or a house church or a group or a conference or a meeting or a gathering, but whatever you call it, that “box” often gets in the way of the simplicity of Christ; it unnecessarily complicates our spiritual life. It brings us down to the level of flesh and blood. Fellowship is no longer spiritual, but is tied to a special place, a special time, a special event, when “fellowship” is scheduled to occur. And it seems that that more people you have, the greater opportunity there is for this religious mindset to takeover and ruin everything.

I like the simplicity of two or three. It changes the whole experience, doesn’t it?

The other interesting thing about this is Jesus never told us when to meet. He never said where to meet. He never said how to meet. He never even told us that we *should* meet. Meeting together was, of course, a custom in the Early Ekklesia. It was their custom to meet on the first day of the week. Nothing wrong with that. I'm saying it was a *custom*, it was not a *command*. There are a lot of *customs* in the New Testament. The way they gathered, and when, and where, and what they did, these were all customs. Customs are not commands. A custom is neither good or bad in and of itself. I will say that customs tend to lead to legalism. People can begin following a custom with good intentions and with good results, but over a period of time, people tend to give customs a certain weight and importance that robs it of its spiritual value. This is what Jesus meant when He said, "You nullify the Word of God with your traditions."

A *command* is different. When God *commands* something then we do it. It is not legalistic to do what God commands. Modern Christians today think they can get along just as well without the Bible, because they think they have the Holy Spirit; so, to them, reading or studying the Bible is too legalistic. But you see, that is a serious error. Doing what God commands is not legalistic, it's just plain, simple obedience. You either do what God says or you don't, but as Samuel said to Saul, "to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen to God is better than offering Him the fat of rams."

So we need to distinguish between a command and a custom. So many people become legalistic over customs and ignore the commands. There are probably more customs than commands in the New Testament, but the customs tend to get all the attention. Customs attract the religious mindset the way honey attracts bees. The religious spirit loves customs. For example, that women should have their head covered in church. Oh, they will find something like that and make a big show of it, as if they have discovered the 11th commandment! There are a lot of customs like that, things that made sense at

the time, things that were appropriate for the people and the situation they were in, but not necessarily appropriate for us today.

Of course, this opens me up to the accusation that if we pick and choose which Scriptures are commands and which are customs, we could justify anything, or just decide that something is a custom and decide we aren't going to follow it. No. I'm not suggesting that we take commandments and turn them into customs, I'm saying let's not take a custom and treat it as if it is a commandment. Do not kill, steal, or commit adultery. Those are commandments, right? We aren't going to minimize those and say, "Well, it's a nice custom to be married to one person at the time, but in today's modern age we're going to dispense with that custom!" Oh no! You don't nullify the Word of God, you don't disobey the commandment of God, in order to follow your own silly ideas and customs that are contrary to God. That's not what I'm saying at all. I'm saying that we often lack enough spiritual discernment and wisdom to be able to tell the difference between what is a command and what is a custom.

Bringing it back around to the idea of gathering together. There are a lot of customs. I see where people gathered and did certain things in the New Testament, but I don't see where Jesus ever commanded these gatherings to take place. He didn't say when to meet, where to meet, or what to do when you meet. He only said that where two or three are gathered together in His Name, He is there in the midst of them. It is a wonderful promise, but even that is not a command. It assumes, and I think it assumes correctly, that at least two or three believers in Jesus will be physically in the same place sometimes. I mean, that seems reasonable, doesn't it? At some point, as a believer in Jesus, you're going to run into another believer in Jesus. And if you are both walking with the Lord, I would imagine that there is going to be some discussion about the things of the Lord. Right? Doesn't that make sense? So, Jesus is saying that when two or three of you are gathered together in His Name, He is there with you. What a wonderful

promise that is! The promise of His presence in the midst of us! But there is no command here. Jesus does not say where these gatherings are to take place. He does not say how often we are to meet. He does not tell us what we are supposed to do or say in these gatherings. In fact, it seems to me that if He is in the midst of the gathering – in other words, if He is there with us when we gather in His Name – then He is the One Who will lead, guide, direct, and teach us. Right? Where is the leader? Who is in charge? It sounds to me that this gathering is so small and intimate that we can dispense with a lot of the stuff we think we need when we gather together and just be normal – two or three people gathered together with Jesus in the midst, and we are sharing the things of the Lord and helping one another, and He is there, directing and guiding whatever we are doing!

But when I talk about this kind of gathering, what do you see in your mind? Do you still see people sitting in a circle? People singing hymns? Somebody preaching? We have all these pictures in our head of what we think a gathering is supposed to look like and feel like – a “Fellowship Fantasy” about how to meet, where to meet, what to do when we meet, and we just ruin the whole thing. We’re following the programming we received from the Institutional Church. Or, we’re following somebody’s teaching or book about how to meet in homes, or we go to their conferences and meetings and come back and try to do things the way they do them. All of that, I’m saying, is a custom. Very often, the custom becomes a tradition that is void of the Life of God.

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CHIP: Jesus never said where to meet, when to meet, how often to meet, or what to do when we meet. And I’ll tell you something else: Jesus never said how long the gathering is supposed to last. Could be five minutes, could be five hours. I don’t know. Could meet

every day for six months, could meet once a week a for a year, could meet one time and that's it. Who can say? Jesus never told us. So if Jesus never said when, where, or how often to meet, then it probably is not that important to Him; therefore, I don't think it should be all that important to us. He just never said. If it was important to know, wouldn't He have told us? He did not say, and by not saying, that actually says a lot.

That probably accounts for all the customs that have sprung up around the subject of gathering together. That's probably why Paul had to answer so many questions about gathering together, precisely because they were doing something that had no specific commandment attached to it. Have you ever thought about why? If it was so important that we gather together a certain way, why didn't Jesus give specific commandments? Now remember, I'm not saying they didn't gather together, I'm saying Jesus – for all His teachings and things He did command – never gave any commandment about gathering together. For that matter, He never gave any commandment to His disciples about celebrating His birthday, or celebrating Easter, or observing any other holy day or special day. Now, just because He didn't command something doesn't mean it is wrong to do it, it just means if you do it, you're following a custom, not a command. Some customs are perfectly harmless. Other customs turn into religious traditions, and after a while the people who follow those customs begin to speak of them as if they are commandments, and they begin to condemn people who don't believe and behave exactly the way they do. That's something you should pay attention to.

What customs are you following as if they are commandments? Is it a harmless custom, or is it a distraction from the simplicity of Christ? Does the custom create greater liberty, or greater legalism? Does it set people free, or does it bring them into bondage?

This is why, when we look in the New Testament, and we see how the Early Ekklesia did things, it is wrong to merely copy their behavior as a New Testament pattern. The one

distinctive about those Early Believers is that they were filled with the Holy Spirit, and were led by Him. I am confident that the Holy Spirit was leading, directing, and governing the Early Ekklesia in the beginning. As things progressed, I am less confident. Do you know how to read the Bible? Do you know how to tell the difference between people who are led by the Spirit and people who have fallen into the flesh? Most cannot, because they are in the flesh themselves. “The natural man cannot receive the things of the Spirit of God, neither can He know them for they are spiritually discerned.” People who lack spiritual discernment lack the ability to distinguish between custom and command, between a good example and a bad example. So when you say, “Brother, do you believe the Holy Spirit was leading the Early Ekklesia?” I would have to say, “It all depends!” In some cases, clearly the Holy Spirit was leading and directing. In some cases, clearly the Holy Spirit was NOT leading and directing. Those with spiritual discernment should be able to see the difference. Those without spiritual discernment will just blindly accept everything as a “New Testament pattern” for “how to do church” and will create all kinds of problems.

Jesus did not give us a pattern, but He did give us a promise! And the promise is that He is in the midst of those gathered in His Name. I mean, seriously, you and one other believer constitutes a gathering of believers. I’m totally serious! I’m not saying it – Jesus is saying it. You know, in many places of government and business, you have to have a certain minimum number of people to constitute a quorum – the least amount of members needed to make decisions. In the United State Senate, you have to have at least 51 Senators to constitute a quorum. There are 100 senators, so that means there has to be a little more than half – 51 out of 100 – in order to conduct business. Different committees, groups and organizations have similar rules.

What is the minimum number required for a gathering of believers in Jesus? Two! Just you and one other person. I mean it’s so simple! But if your idea of “gathering” is a Bible

study with a dozen people or a church service with a hundred people or a conference with 500 people then you're really missing out on a lot of fellowship opportunities all around you.

Now, I think I know where some of the confusion comes from. We read in the Book of Acts how 3,000 people were saved on the Day of Pentecost, how 5,000 people were saved a few days later when the lame man was healed, and we get focused on those numbers and imagine that whenever God does something "big" it's going to involve tens of thousands of people. So we think anything small is unimportant.

I just want to remind you of one thing – Jesus had many thousands of people who followed Him around and listened to His teachings, but He only had twelve disciples. So, thank the Lord for the many thousands of people who listened and believed in the Book of Acts – but were all of them disciples? Maybe they were. I'm not saying they weren't. Then again, maybe they were not. Numbers can be deceiving. Numbers can create more problems than they solve. Numbers can give us the illusion of great things happening when there is no depth. It was the large numbers that created the first argument in the Early Ekklesia, as one group complained that their widows were being neglected. Numbers! Lots of people mean lots of problems. You begin to see this thing getting a little bit out of control because of so many people. So then there had to be some organization to keep things where they should be, and perhaps there you see the beginning of the institutionalization of Christianity. All very logical, necessary, needful steps and decisions made because of large numbers.

But then these customs – for example, the custom of meeting together on the first day of the week – these customs became hardened into a religious tradition. Someone has said that fanaticism consists of continuing to do things after you have forgotten why you are doing them. So it is very easy to see how the custom of gathering on the first day of the

week led to a religious tradition that says you **MUST** gather together on the first day of the week, and there's a certain **WAY** you must gather, and a certain **PLACE** you must gather. And eventually, the small groups of two or three grew to the point where they can't meet in homes anymore, so they began building church buildings to meet in, which totally changed the spirit and the group dynamic of the gathering, until Christianity was just another religion with its own set of customs, ceremonies, liturgies, holy days, rules and regulations, clergy and laity, organization, building funds. And so the custom continues to this day, and we think the custom is a command – we look at **THAT** and think **THAT** is the church Jesus said He would build. No, that is the church that **MAN** built. Jesus is building a house of living stones; He gave us no command for building churches or even building “**THE CHURCH.**”

As I say, not all customs are bad – but when the custom brings God's people into bondage, when the custom exalts some pastor, prophet, or Pope as the spiritual head in the place of Christ, when the custom leads us away from the simplicity of Christ and confuses us with religion, when the custom does more harm than good, when the custom makes the Word of God of none effect through its tradition, then we would do well to question that custom and stop keeping it.

I still go back to what Jesus said – two or three, gathered in His Name, is good enough for Him. And if it's good enough for Him, my friend, then it is good enough for me. In many ways, and for many reasons, just two or three is better than two or three hundred, or two or three thousand. Whenever we think bigger is better, Jesus has a different idea. Whenever we think of growth and expanding and increasing our numbers, Jesus thinks that less is more, that we need to strip away and get down to the basics again. That seems to be His thinking so many times when it comes to the crowds. The crowds gathered, and He would shake them up with a difficult message, so they would be offended and scatter. The ones that stayed were the ones He wanted to work with, and

He would take them in more deeply, sharing with them the hidden wisdom and deeper truths.

And so, when it comes to gathering together, unless you are a hermit refusing all contact, it would be nearly impossible for you to forsake the assembling of yourself together, seeing that the minimum requirement for a gathering in Jesus' Name is just you and one other person. But even then, there are seasons of isolation, times when you are alone there in the desert, walking with Jesus outside the camp, so far beyond the Jordan that no one is around. It may seem like you are all alone, but really, you are not. Opportunities are all around you. Stop looking for a church, or a group, or a place, or a meeting. Stop following the crowd and begin following Christ. Open your eyes and start with the one brother, the one sister, right where you are, and realize that it's not about a meeting, but about having Christ in the midst of two or three.

That will do it for this episode of *Outside the Camp*. Until we meet again, this is Chip Brogden, reminding you that this is the day that the Lord has made, so make it a good day; and remember that greater is He that is in you, than he that is in the world!

ANNOUNCER: You've been listening to Outside the Camp with author and teacher Chip Brogden. We hope you enjoyed today's broadcast and found it helpful and encouraging. If you'd like to get additional teachings, audio recordings, books and other Christ-centered resources to help you grow spiritually, visit us online at ChipBrogden.com. Outside the Camp is made possible by the prayers and financial support of listeners like you. Until next time, on behalf of Chip Brogden, I'm Kathy Smith, reminding you that you can do all things through Christ Who strengthens you!