

tism and breaking bread focus our minds on the meaning of the cross of Christ and remind us that “the flesh profiteth nothing”. Although they are “works”, they focus our minds on what we *cannot* do, not on what we *can* do, for both remind us of what God has done for our salvation through

the Lord Jesus Christ because there was nothing that we could do for ourselves: “For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh” (Rom. 8:3).

# “Let all things be done decently and in order”

David Levin

*In seeking to ensure that things are “done decently and in order” (1 Cor. 14:40), we must remember that rules exist for the benefit of the brethren and sisters in the ecclesia, not as ends in themselves.*

**A**NY ORGANISATION—religious, secular, educational, humanitarian, social—exists to help its members advance their purpose or cause, the purpose often pithily stated as a *raison d’être*. So long as the cause or purpose for existence remains, then the organisation remains. The existence of the organisation creates a second interest, that of maintaining the organisation. The structure (officers, localities, constitutions) of the organisation, and its functions (meetings, conferences, publications, games, publicity, or whatever is appropriate to the purpose for which the members formed the organisation), create a separate arena of interest. An organisation of *necessity* draws some attention to its own needs, that is, maintaining the organisation itself.

## **The basis of organisations**

This observation is neither condemnatory nor reflecting any bias against organisations; it is an inevitable reality of human life and one of the two basic organisational facts from which we begin our spiritual aspirations. When a group of people forms an organisation to help that group advance a cause or achieve a goal, then we must recognise that the organisation itself now becomes a subject of our interest, with its own needs for maintenance and function. The first law of organisational life is that the maintenance of the organisation itself requires some attention and energy.

Lacking any centralised power, headquarters, ‘official’ denominational name or status, or governing élite, the worldwide body of Christadelphians has a minimum of structure.

The structure we do have is largely experienced at the ecclesial level. Most of us encounter local ecclesial-level structures on a weekly basis, perhaps two or three times a week. Less frequently, but perhaps several times annually, we encounter our brothers and sisters in larger organisational contexts such as fraternals, Bible schools, and preaching campaigns.

Each level of organisation contributes to the goals of members; however, the organisation *per se* is not a principled, goal-directed entity in and of itself. An organisation exists materially only in the people who constitute its membership, and as such cannot have goals or rules of its own. This is the second law of organisational life: the organisation, considered just as the organisation itself apart from its members, has no goals, interests, or purpose of its own. These two realities—that the organisation itself demands its members’ attention, but has no goal or purpose of its own—form the basis from which we can formulate the operation of our ecclesias and other organisations.

Divinely instituted and with spiritual (as opposed to material, political, or selfish) interests, we are, nonetheless, a group of humans organised loosely at the global level and somewhat more structured at the local level. Our charter is from God, and our head, the Lord Jesus himself, is an immortal human not *physically* present and active among us. We are humans in a human organisation striving for non-human goals; to

achieve these goals we must use spiritual modes of organisational life.

### **The ecclesia exists to promote spiritual goals**

The purpose of the ecclesia, whether taken globally or locally, is clear, though we can state it in a variety of ways, each statement emphasising a different aspect of our religious life. Any of the following examples provide succinct statements of the *raison d'être* of an individual local ecclesia or of the worldwide organisation known as 'Christadelphians'.

- to advance the gospel message
- to help its members grow in Christ
- to further the pursuit of Christian teaching
- to develop faith and love in its members
- to provide mutual support in developing spiritual lives.

Many other brief statements would suffice equally well. The ecclesia is the vehicle through which the purpose is realised. Given the inherently social nature of discipleship (love is not a solitary virtue), we could say that the ecclesia is the vehicle through which we realise spiritual goals.

### **The ecclesia only exists in its members**

Returning to a key point, we note that there is no 'thing' known as the ecclesia that exists independently of its constituent members. Names such as 'Christadelphians Worldwide' and 'Baltimore Ecclesia' have no independent reality or goals. The ecclesia has no existence outside of its membership. We want to highlight the difference between the *members* of the ecclesia and the *organisation* known as the ecclesia. The ecclesia exists only in so far as it has members; and the guidelines that regulate the ecclesia's function belong in every sense to the members of the ecclesia. Members create, interpret and apply all ecclesial policies; there is no entity that answers to 'ecclesia' that has any say in the matter. The ecclesia might have a constitution, bylaws and a format for worship, but these do not belong to the ecclesia; they are the creation of, and therefore the servants of, the members of the ecclesia. The 'ecclesia' did not create these rules. The 'ecclesia' has no purposes for them; only the members of the ecclesia do.

Now why do we labour such an obvious point? We do so because unnecessary spiritual inertia and ecclesial strife ensues when we overlook this principle. We can appeal to the protocols that govern the organisation as if the organisa-

tion itself (the ecclesia) did have independent existence. Waving the banner of "decently and in order", the ecclesia can take on a life and reality of its own. Breathing through its constitution and acting through its bylaws, it enslaves its members to its traditions and customs. Tradition can become a major force of inertia here, especially when bolstered with appeals to "decently and in order". Any deviation from the received customs is treated as if the ecclesia itself has spoken, and all must listen. Everything must be done "decently and in order"; it is the ecclesia that demands, say, Bible class must be on Wednesday, or that the speaker must wear a tie, or that the service must follow the same format, week after week, year after year, and it cannot change because THE ECCLESIA, theoretically an abstract entity, now holds sway over its own members. The created rules its creator. We become slaves to tradition and cultural mores.

### **Contemporary application of this phrase**

It should be plain to us that such deference to tradition, policies, rules and customs is far from what Paul meant by "decently and in order". Taken tightly to the context, the phrase would have no application to us at all, for Paul used it to bring order to the cacophony of prophets and speakers of tongues in Corinth (1 Cor. 14:40; cf. vv. 30-33). We do not have any such worries today of simultaneously inspired brothers and sisters rising forth in prophecy and praise. I have never encountered two of *any* kind of speakers simultaneously voicing their words of exhortation or teaching. We do not have any problems running a smoothly sequenced, orderly and meaningful worship service.

If "decently and in order" in its original coinage regulated the Spirit-driven utterances, and by extension applies to any speakers in the worship assembly, then we should have trouble applying it to our current worship, for we have no public manifestations of the Spirit gifts, nor do we have a problem with simultaneous exhorters. Having no way to use the phrase anywhere close to its original usage, we resort to a third level of meaning for this phrase: that it should regulate the formalities, culture, customs and scruples of the ecclesia.

Today we hear the phrase in the context of ecclesial policy, usually applying to organisational matters. It can come to represent the supposed needs of the 'ecclesia', as if the ecclesia were an entity speaking its own needs. Hence the theme

of this article, which only intends to raise one point: that we consider carefully whose cause we are advancing when we invoke the “decently and in order” mantra. Is it the spiritual cause of the membership of the ecclesia, that is, the development of love, faith, and good works? Or is it servitude to traditions of the ‘ecclesia’? It is in particular the misapplication of the title phrase that I address, and further, the mistaken notion behind it that uniformity, conformity, tradition and formality are integral to ecclesial worship and function.

A ‘meeting’ by definition involves more than one person; it usually involves tens or perhaps even hundreds. To meet effectively *requires* mutually accepted conventions involving the starting time, items and order of the service, and who will perform these duties. Those are necessary. Beyond that we are probably in the territory of personal preferences masquerading as ‘ecclesial’ needs.

### **Discipleship in ecclesial matters**

The organisation has no goals or objectives, but the people belonging to it do. They have spiritual objectives, and the organisation can assist in attaining those goals. The organisation itself also becomes a source of ‘overhead’; that is, the function of the organisation itself absorbs some of the members’ time, thought and energy. This does not mean, however, that organisational matters, such as determining the ecclesial forms of structure, operation and worship, are devoid of spiritual content. Determining the ecclesial ‘rules of operation’ should be a spiritual exercise. Is each policy or rule necessary for the aspirations of the spiritual goals of the members, or do they only serve to regiment and formalise the ‘organisation’? Do spiritual rather than organisational priorities indeed drive the workings of the ecclesia? And are we aware that, under the new covenant, flexibility and personal change are requisite for spiritual growth?

What is the lesson in all this? If we are to realise our spiritual goals, we need to keep our organisational concern in its proper place: our servant, not our master. When we feel we must adhere to cultural standards under some rationalised form of the “decently and in order” rubric, we have lost sight of our ultimate goal. Our organisational formats are of our own mak-

ing and ought to provide only the structure, not the substance, of our service and worship. Time, energy and money expended on organisational matters is overhead.

### **Toleration and accommodation**

Is there any spiritual content in any organisational matter? Regulating how long the exhorter speaks, or where he stands, or what he wears, has no bearing on the quality and relevance of the exhortation. Regulating musical selections and just about any other organisational constraint proposed under the rubric of “decently and in order” usually falls into the same category. It is not the content, it is the process that we need to attend to, for it is in the *process* of determining our few necessary organisational regulations that we encounter the spiritual dimension. Only in *how* we handle situations where people have differing tastes and preferences do we have any platform for spiritual values. It is the duty of the majority to *tolerate* the outliers, and it is the duty of the outliers to *accommodate* the will of the majority of the ecclesia. Where toleration and accommodation overlap, we have ecclesial harmony and spiritual growth; where they have a gap between them, we have strife and perhaps division.

We have now moved from the ‘what?’ question that applies to the organisation to the ‘how?’ question that applies to the people within the organisation. The *whats* (the particulars of our meetings) are far less important than the *hows* (the interactional processes that establish the particulars). An abstract organisation can have *whats*, but only people can traffic in *hows*. Spiritual growth and love reside in the realm of *how* we interact with our brothers and sisters.

If we want a valid contemporary usage of the concept embodied in the phrase “decently and in order”, we need to look at the *how* of our ecclesial life, not the *what*. The process of our interactions, not the material and logistic particulars of our worship, is the proper arena to insist on “decently and in order”. Working out our differences “decently and in order” will manifest and further develop the spiritual values of love, patience, tolerance, understanding and submission. With respect to *how* we interact one with another, let all things be done quite decently and in good order.

“Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another” (Rom. 14:19).