

THE ASSEMBLY MESSENGER

Proclaiming the Timeless Truths of the Church to a New Generation of Believers

Volume 97-11

Dear Reader

We have spent ten issues of the newsletter looking at the facts about the Church and what is and is not God's true ground of gathering. Although there is much more detail which we will continue in the next issue, the Lord willing, we want to summarize what we have learned, plus help whet your appetite for more. To do this we will use an expanded version of Bob Costen's little tract entitled *Assembly Distinctives*, of course expanded with his permission. Bob uses this unique title because there are biblical truths that distinguish God's Assembly from all that surround it — Judaism, Islam ... and from much that professes to be Christian. We pray this little summary will prove helpful. Remember to prove or test all things, hold fast the right (1 Thes.5:21).

Assembly Distinctives

In setting forth a number of the distinctives of God's Assembly, it is not with the thought to belittle dear believers or to cast a bad reflection on the group to which they belong, but simply to point out from Scripture how Christians should gather for "church" fellowship and briefly contrast that with what is commonly practiced today.

All true believers are members of God's one and only Assembly, the Body of Christ, the House of God -- expressions which help define His true Church. While there are many similarities of belief, doctrine and practice among many Christians, there are certain distinctives which set apart *God's* Assembly from that practiced in many denominational "churches" and other groups. The reasons for considering these distinctives are:

- To help Christians see the truth as to God's Assembly.
- To help those who wish to know the reasons for differences in principles and practices between those seeking to maintain God's True Ground and those walking with more commonly known Christian groups.
- To assist young people in giving answers for their "assembly" position; such as why they meet as they do and why they don't meet with that large group down the street that has so many activities.
- To reaffirm the precious truths of God's true Assembly and God's True Ground of Gathering.
- To show that these distinctives are Scriptural and involve many vital truths.

What then are some of these distinctives in comparison with many common practices? The distinctives are given in bold type, while the common practice is indented immediately underneath.

Christ and His name the center of gathering, and the one body the basis of gathering (Acts 4:12; Mt. 18:20; 1 Cor. 1:9-13; 12:12-13; Eph. 4:3-4; 1 Tim. 3:15; 2 Tim. 2:19-22). We have no authorization from the Head of the Church to gather to any name other than His own name — the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. The only basis for gathering is that we are all one in God's sight. There is *one* body, not two, not two thousand!

Many love the Lord, but have a denominational name and affiliation that is far narrower than the one body. Therefore, it is contrary to the Word of God and should be avoided! See 1 Corinthians 1:12-13; 3:4.

Christ is the Head of His Assembly: His Lordship is to be owned (Eph. 2:20-23; 4:15-16; Col. 1:18; 2:6,19; 1 Cor. 8:6). There is no other Head. All direction and control and sustenance (teaching) is to come from Him, through His Word, the direction of the Holy Spirit, and the gifts He uses. He alone has authority over our lives.

Many own the Lordship of Christ in their personal lives, but make "church" leaders and governing boards the effective "head" of their group. Others wrongly weaken the authority of the Scriptures by also accepting the authority of men and their traditions. This is carried to the extreme in Roman Catholicism where the Pope is recognized (falsely, we should add) as the *vicar* or representative of Christ on earth to administer the Church, and where tradition is taken on essentially equal footing as Scripture. Note Mark 7:7-8.

Interdependency and unity: all local churches or assemblies are an integral part of the whole Church under the control of the Head of the Church (1 Cor. 1:2; 12:12-13,25; Eph. 4:4). Under God's plan each

local assembly was simply the local representation of the whole Church. There was a common teaching, common practice, common reception, common discipline. What affected one, affected all. Since Christ is Head of His Church, no group of men, no matter how talented and gifted, had any right to be a governing body.

Independency (each local church independent of other local churches) or centralized control by some governing board, are two favorite ways for religious groups to be governed. The advocates of these methods often strongly defend their positions, but cannot bring Scripture to support their views *because there is none!*

The worship service is the Lord's supper, which is observed every Lord's day, since the Lord arose from the dead on the first day of the week (Acts 2:42; 20:7; 1 Cor.11:26). We are called together by the Lord to remember Him in relation to His death, His sacrifice at Calvary, through breaking (and eating) the bread and drinking the wine. The example of the apostles and the disciples given us in Scripture is that *that* meeting should be once a week, on the first day of the week (our Sunday). It is a time of worship (having *Him* before us) where we can exercise our “holy priesthood” by offering up “spiritual sacrifices” — the fruit of our lips (1 Pet.2:5; Heb.13:15). It is not a time for gospel preaching and general teaching. Priesthood, not gift, is to be evident.

The “communion service” (the breaking of bread) is generally held once a month or twice a year, with the preaching of the gospel or teaching ministry called the worship service, showing little appreciation for the great privilege of remembering our Lord or of what is true worship. The Lord knows that we need these weekly remembrances to keep Himself constantly before the eyes of our mind, so we will remain true to him.

The priesthood of all believers practiced, with all spiritual gift given room to function by the leading of the Holy Spirit (1 Pet.2:5,9; Rev.5:10). Every believer is a “holy priest” (1 Pet.2:5) to enable him or her to worship, and also a “royal” or “kingly” priest, enabling us to proclaim the praises of our Lord (1 Pet.2:9). In the Old Testament the people could not be directly in God’s presence and needed to come to a selected few “priests” to have any approach to God. Today, every believer, as a priest, has nearness and access to God. We all can come “boldly [without fear] to the throne of grace” (Heb.4:16). Since each of us has at least one spiritual gift we all have a service to perform for our Lord, each in its proper place as directed by the Holy Spirit. Having the gift is God’s ordination to use it as the Spirit directs (Rom.12:5-8; 1 Pet.4:10-11). These gifts are all that God needs to establish Christians in the truth (if they will have open ears and hearts) and to further the work of Christ on earth.

While many believe that Christians are given a spiritual gift to minister to one another, the functioning of such gift is greatly hindered because there is usually one person, employed for hire, with assistants, who does the preaching and the praying and the worship, etc. It would be thought out of order for a brother in the audience to get up to preach or pray or break the bread, etc. See Romans 12:4-8 and 1 Corinthians 12:4-11.

Women's role, as a picture of headship and of creation, is one of subjection, not speaking when the church is “in assembly,” learning in quietness, with heads covered in public gatherings. Men’s role is to take the public place as God’s spokesmen, with heads uncovered (1 Cor.11:1-16; 14:34-35; Eph.5:23-33; 1 Tim.2:8-15). God makes it plain that He has assigned different roles for men and women to be played out in religious gatherings. God established man as head of the woman (1 Cor.11:3, 8-9; Gen.3:16). The woman is also a picture of the Church as seen in Ephesians 5, while man is a picture of Christ. Christ teaches the Church through His teachers; the Church *never* teaches Christ. The angels watch this being worked out on earth (Eph.3:10). Therefore, when the Church is “in assembly” — gathered as the Church — the woman does not speak. She is *always* to learn in *quietness* (the correct translation of 1 Timothy 2:12), regardless of the setting. *Quietness* does not mean *silence* in non-assembly settings, but the gentle and quiet spirit of 1 Peter 3:4. But she is never to *teach* the man because she is to fulfill the above pictures. However, she may have the gifts a man has, and fulfill them *in a proper place*. Philip the evangelist had four unmarried daughters who prophesied (Acts 21:9), but you can be sure it was done in a way that did not violate God’s directions as to the meetings of the local assembly.

The clear teachings of Scripture on this subject have been clouded almost universally by the smokescreen of inferiority/superiority. *There is no such thought found in Scripture!* The claim is often made that Paul was simply a woman-hating bachelor, or he didn’t understand women, or his words simply conveyed a cultural “reality” of Corinth where short-haired, uncovered women often were prostitutes. Wrong! Inspired Scripture says that the things that Paul wrote are the “commandments of the Lord” (1 Cor.14:37). As a result of this

unbelief and faulty teaching, women are often active in preaching and teaching and praying in the church, publicly. Virtually everywhere, in almost every denomination and group, headcoverings have been discarded as a relic of the past. This is a very sad giving up of divine truth to fit in with modern times. Too often the men wrongly take the place of the woman and never open their mouth in praise or worship.

Christian financial giving according to New Testament teaching. No solicitations (1 Cor.16:2; 2 Cor. 8:11-13; 9:6-7). The Lord's work must be supported *by believers*, not the religious world (3 Jn.7). The preaching of the gospel is to be without charge (1 Cor.9:18; 2 Cor.2:17; 11:7). Many people think they can buy their way into God's favor, so *giving* is simply a means to sooth their conscience so they can do as they please at other times. But if a *Christian* has been helped in the Word, he is responsible to help the one who supplied the help, and he will reap what he sows (Gal.6:7). Believers must prayerfully judge whether the work they are thinking about supporting is according to the Word of God. Much, even among evangelical Christianity, is not according to the mind of God, even though the Lord may well use the word preached to peoples' salvation and spiritual growth.

Tithes and offerings are taken at many services, with frequent strong appeals for money, which is accepted from unsaved as well as from saved people. Many have seen this carried to great extremes by some radio and television preachers. Some are more subtle; i.e., "Write us a letter," etc., but, even then, there is no warning that we've ever heard that the unsaved were not to enclose funds because God has said so.

The local assembly is the sphere for true edification and growth; through the meetings of the local assembly, home Bible studies, expository addresses and prophetic ministry (Rom.12:6-8; 1 Cor.12:4-11; 14:29-32; Eph. 4:7-16; Acts 20:20; 1 Pet.4:10-11). The local assembly is where the Holy Spirit is free to use the Lord's gifts to bring out exactly the ministry most suited to the particular audience at that particular time. Timothy was told to "hold fast the pattern of sound words" (2 Tim.1:13). The JND translation says to have an *outline* of sound words." That takes prayerful personal study along with the ministry (preaching) in the local assembly.

As a prerequisite to virtually any kind of preaching, young people are sent to seminaries to learn the Bible. While some form of established classroom study may be helpful in learning Hebrew and Greek (certainly not necessary to be an effective Bible teacher or preacher), such schooling, other than the school of God, are never found in Scripture. Most seminaries are now seriously modernistic and/or charismatic, or modify what the Bible teaches as to separation and association, to accommodate these false positions. Most denominations and other groups wouldn't think of hiring a preacher who hadn't graduated from an accredited seminary. Therefore, they would never hire a Paul, and particularly not a Peter or John who, as fishermen, apparently had minimal formal education. This is a system of man that finds no scriptural sanction.

The Holy Spirit is given His place of leadership and presidency in local assembly meetings, using whomever He will (1 Cor.3:16; 12:7-11; Eph.2:22). This is a great truth of the Church. While many realize that the Holy Spirit indwells believers individually (1 Cor.6:19) they don't understand that He indwells the Church collectively (1 Cor.3:16). Whether individually or collectively the Holy Spirit expects to be *president*, not simply *resident*. Not only does He distribute the various spiritual manifestations as He wills to different believers, He operates or manipulates (in a good sense) the gifts/manifestations He gives for the blessing of the gathered saints (1 Cor.12:7-11). Remember that 1 Corinthians was written to a local assembly.

In virtually every denomination a clergyman, pastor, minister, or a hired assistant leads or officiates. The audience learns what are *their* views on Scripture, not necessarily what the Holy Spirit wants taught. Many who the Holy Spirit would desire to use are relegated to the position of *laymen* who sit in the audience, often with their gift(s) at least partially wasted. This whole system is a terrible slur on the work of the Holy Spirit — really a denial of His work — and thus fundamental error! We need to see it as God sees it!

All believers are called saints, Christians, and brethren; and all are equally members of the one Body of Christ (1 Cor.1:2; 12:12,27; Eph.3.6; 4:4; Heb.2:11-12). Since we are to gather only to the Lord's precious name, we have no right to refer to ourselves by any name or title not true of all Christians. Although we have differing spiritual gifts, and may honor one for his work for the Lord, there is no "caste" or "class" system in New Testament Christianity. We all equally are priests, all have a gift, all equally are accepted in the Beloved.

In virtually every denomination unscriptural class distinctions are upheld by having a clergy-laity system. The clergy -- the reverend, pastor, doctor or bishop -- are the superior, spiritual class and the people are considered

as their flock and as laypeople. Again, this is a terrible slur upon New Testament Christianity. Further, most Christians add some denominational name to themselves, for example, saying “I am a Methodist.” Where is *that* found in Scripture? See 1 Corinthians 1:10-13.

Servants of the Lord are ordinary brethren like you and me who are called of God to travel and/or to minister to the local assemblies. Some, at the call of the Lord, devote full time to the Lord's work. Others maintain secular jobs while serving. In one sense we *all* are servants of the Lord since we all have a gift to use for Him (1 Cor.9:7-14; Gal.6:6; Eph.4:11-16; Acts 18:1-3; 20:33-35; Rev.1:1). Being a servant is not a class distinction, but a great privilege we all can enjoy, even if not called to serve full time.

Preachers and ministers are generally screened, called, and voted on by a congregation to serve a local church and are paid a salary. They are given the place of spiritual leadership and superiority as long as the preacher remains “our pastor.” In other groups or denominations the preacher is appointed over a flock by a governing board of that denomination. Again, this is a terrible slur upon Christ's principles for His Church. We are thankful for every godly pastor who faithfully preaches the Word as he knows it, but this does not change the seriousness of the error of the “clergy-laity” system.

God calls and equips some to take the oversight or leadership locally. Such leadership is always a plurality. While there is no authorization to appoint them, God has marked out their qualifications and the assembly is to *recognize* those who qualify (Acts 20:17,28; 1 Thes.5:12-13; 1 Tim.3:1-13; 5:17-20; Tit.1-5-9). The unfortunate use of the word *rule* in the KJV and NKJV has led many to think of Elders as a ruling class. They are not. They look after the welfare of the local assembly and *take the lead* (the correct translation) in showing what is right. In Hebrews 13:17 we are told to *obey* those who take the lead, but the Greek word means to obey when you have been persuaded that what you have been told is scripturally correct. The Lord willing we will study *elders* much more thoroughly in a future newsletter.

Almost universally, elders and bishops are appointed or elected. This effectively says that the people who do the electing or appointing know more than does the Holy Spirit (Acts 20:28) about the organization or functioning of the local assembly. The negative implications are very serious. Although probably not intended as such, such conduct is another slur upon the Holy Spirit and therefore is evil.

Meetings are held in comparatively simple, non-ornate halls, homes and rented meeting rooms (Acts 28:30; Rom.16:15; Phile.2). Under Judaism, there *were* fancy tabernacles and temples with ornate and expensive furniture. None of that is found in Christianity, for our worship is to be in *spirit* and in *truth*. That which simply satisfies the old nature or makes one feel religious without touching the spirit is not found in Christianity. The *building* is not the “church” (in spite of common usage). The *believers* who gather together in some building are part of the whole Church. They (if gathered Scripturally) *represent* the whole Church in that particular location.

Often, no expense is spared to have ornate buildings, stained-glass windows, altar rails, candles, choirs, robes, pipe organs, steeples, and other things that appeal to the natural but religious man, and even to worldly Christians. These things remind one of *Judaism*, which was earthly in character.

Missionaries are called by God and sustained by faith in Him through His people (Acts 13:2-4; 1 Cor.9:3-14; 2 Cor.9:11; Phil.4:15-19; 1 Thes.2:9). God calls some of His servants to leave home and friends and serve in far away locations, often in primitive conditions, to bring the Word of God to various peoples. How thankful we should be for these dedicated people who devote their lives to the Lord in this way.

Because of modern day religious business practices, many missionaries will not step out on faith without assurance of financial backing, often through a missionary board. But if a work is of the Lord, He will always sustain. No board has any right to dictate what a missionary teaches. That is between himself and the Lord. However, a missionary, like every other believer walking on God's True Ground, is to be under the discipline of the local assembly with which he expresses fellowship in the breaking of bread.

Closing Comments

While there are other distinctives of Christ-honoring assembly walk, these are the ones Bob Costen has pointed out and they supply a good summary of what we have learned this past year. It is our prayer that each of you

will be found walking on God's True Ground in assembly fellowship that meets the requirements of God's Word. The Lord willing we will now study the meetings or gatherings of the local assembly as found in Scripture. Please continue to pray for this work. Please continue to send in names and addresses of those who tell you they would like to receive the Assembly Messenger.

BC and RPD