

THE ASSEMBLY MESSENGER

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

Volume 98-12

Dear Reader

We have spent eleven issues of the newsletter looking at the facts about the Church and God's true ground of gathering. Now we want to turn to where all we have learned is put into practice -- the local church or assembly -- and see what God has to say. One might think that once we understood the facts about the Church, all else would be easy. Not so! There are many problems and concerns, and many human ideas, that primarily affect the local assembly, so we will have ample material to carry us for another year, the Lord willing.

Let's begin with the *meetings* (the gatherings) of the local assembly as found in Scripture. We have not used the term *services* of the local assembly, though commonly used in the denominations, because it has the connotation of something done *for* the audience *by* the clergy or others. Not generally so in the true local assembly! We may have some surprises here for you to contemplate before the Lord. Remember to prove all things, but if what is said is correct, than hold on to it and put it into practice (1 Thes.5:19).

THE MEETINGS OF THE ASSEMBLY

“And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in prayers” (Acts.2:42 -- NKJV). “And they persevered in the teaching and fellowship of the apostles, in breaking of bread and prayers” (Acts 2:42 -- JND)

This verse is at the end of the chapter that describes the beginning of the early Church (Assembly), and it defines the meetings of the early Assembly -- what the brethren did *together* as a local assembly as opposed to at home, privately or socially. We want to see what *Scripture* says about these gatherings or meetings together, which will help us define *our* local assembly gatherings. The tone of Scripture is that the saints of God should get together often, for we are told in Hebrews 10:24-25 to “consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, *not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together* as is the manner of some, but exhorting (encouraging) one another, and *so much the more* as you see the Day (of the Lord) approaching.” We today see that great future Day approaching more clearly than at any time in the world's history and therefore specially need the encouragement and spiritual strength that being together affords because Satan is increasingly active!

The *whole local assembly* should gather. We have the expression “whole church come together in one place” in 1 Corinthians 14:23. We often are so careless in this that only a small part of the local assembly meets together each week, even for the *assembly meetings!* Have we forgotten to consider the *Lord's* desires for us and our spiritual needs as we rush towards the Rapture and meeting the Lord face to face?

Assembly Meetings

First we need to determine what are the meetings of the local assembly that are scripturally *assembly meetings* and which are simply religiously-oriented get-togethers of a more informal nature. In 1 Corinthians 11:18 there is a coming together “*as a church*” as opposed to meeting informally. The very accurate JND translation says “*in assembly.*” In 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, twice in connection with instructions to godly sisters, Paul (by divine commandment -- v.37) says in the literal Greek, “Let your women keep silent *in assembly*, for ... it is shameful for women to speak *in assembly.*” It has nothing to do with being in the building where the local assembly meets, but it is *when the local assembly meets in the character of the local assembly.* See also verses 19 and 28 in the JND translation. From piecing together the various portions of Scripture on this subject, we believe that five characteristics particularly define assembly meetings. They are:

- *the people have gathered to Christ's name alone on the ground of the one body*
- *the absolute liberty of the Holy Spirit to use whomsoever He wills in the progression of the meeting*
- *the meeting is clearly defined in the Bible*
- *there is no pre-arranged man-made agenda*
- *man's gift (even though given by God) is not prominent.*

THE APOSTLES' DOCTRINE: The Open Ministry Meeting

The only *assembly meeting* defined in Scripture for the ministry of God's Word is the so-called *open-ministry meeting* of 1 Corinthians 14:29-31 -- *open* in the sense that any brother has liberty to speak when led of the Holy Spirit to do so. Some call it the *prophetic* meeting. Here we have a meeting where the Holy Spirit uses two or three brothers to act as prophets for the local assembly. As we previously studied, a prophet, particularly in its New Testament sense, is not one who fore-tells the future, but who *tells forth God's Word* as directed by Him, to meet the needs *God* knows are in the local assembly at that particular moment. Therefore, it is not a matter of a teacher's gift, but the Holy Spirit using whomsoever He wills to bring the word He wants spoken at that time, whether for five minutes or for half an hour. This meeting is *never* to be taken over by one man, for there are to be at least two who speak, but not more than three. It is not a free-for-all, for one who has a message laid on his heart is to wait for the present speaker to sit down (v.30). *God* is not the author of confusion (v.33). If there is confusion it is from a fleshly or satanic source. "Let all things be done decently and in order" (v.40).

This meeting can be held as often as there is spiritual energy to carry it on. At some Bible conferences there are ministry meetings three times in a week; in some local assemblies it might be weekly or monthly or, unfortunately, even less often. Just remember that the Holy Spirit can't use spiritually-empty or unwilling vessels! Are *you* ready and desiring to be used, dear brother, whether you are 20, 40 or 60 years of age?

OTHER MEETINGS TO LEARN THE APOSTLES' DOCTRINE

The Lecture (Preaching by Gifted Brothers)

In Acts 20:7, in the same time frame as the breaking of bread for convenience's sake, Paul lectured or preached to the brethren gathered together. Although he surely was led by the Holy Spirit in what he said, he spoke *as a spiritually-gifted brother* while the audience was silent. See also Acts 19:8-10 where Paul preached over a period of years in one location, teaching the brethren. This shows that it is acceptable practice for the local assembly to support and attend lectures on God's Word as an adjunct to the assembly meetings. But these lectures don't meet the qualifications of an assembly meeting: they are carried out on the exercise and responsibility of gifted servants of the Lord speaking for the Lord, and are permitted and supported by the local assembly for the spiritual and practical benefit of the believers in the audience.

Scripture Reading

From 1 Timothy 4:13 it seems as if gifted brothers should lead in reading the Scriptures publicly. This meeting has the character of teaching doctrine and of exhortation of the brethren to carry on amid discouragements and worldliness. While this meeting may well involve the entire local assembly and others also, it seems that gift is more evident here, whether of one or more brethren. It does not have the characteristics of an assembly meeting as defined above, although it is a very important means to help further our understanding of Scripture.

Informal Study

In Acts 17:11 we have the account of Paul's visit to Berea to preach the Word -- a lecture -- and thus teach them of this new thing called the Church (Assembly) and of other things too. What did the Bereans do? They readily received what Paul preached to them, but they then met informally and "searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so." They informally gathered together to search out the truth or error of what Paul said. Paul highly commended them for this. Might we be just as diligent! Another instance of informal Bible study is seen in Acts 18:26. Aquila and Priscilla heard Apollos speak, but he was limited in his understanding of recent events. Therefore Aquila and Priscilla took him aside -- maybe to their home -- and helped him understand the Scriptures and ways of God more accurately.

These examples furnish all the room we need for gathering to hear the Word preached by teachers and other gifted brethren, or to have a Sunday School or to have a gospel meeting or to have Bible Study meetings or to have Young Peoples' meetings or to have home meetings. But these meetings do not have the characteristics of *assembly meetings* and should not be allowed to take the place of assembly meetings. Those rules *specifically* for assembly meetings do not apply to the more informal meetings. But remember there are rules or roles that *always* apply, such as a head covering for sisters and no head covering for the brothers *whenever* -- in whatever setting -- there is going to be prayer or preaching (prophesying) (1 Cor.11:3-16).

FELLOWSHIP

Along with what was said as to the informal meetings above, there is every room to have fellowship -- things in common -- together. The assembly can have fellowship in Sunday School, Young Peoples' work, childrens' meetings, gospel work, so-called fellowship-suppers, etc. The assembly works together *and in agreement*, encouraging one another in the work the Lord has for each of them. The assembly has fellowship in all aspects of the work of building up (edifying) the body of Christ (Eph.4:12).

THE BREAKING OF BREAD AND WORSHIP

The meeting to break bread is definitely an assembly meeting. We gather around our Lord to remember Him at His request *as holy priests* (not as gifted brethren) and as His brethren who are purged worshipers (Heb.10:1-2) "to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Pet.2:5). See Hebrews 13:15. Gift should not be evident. The Holy Spirit is free to use whomsoever He wills (1 Cor.12:11) to speak for the assembly in a word of praise, worship or thankfulness, to give out a *suitable* hymn (Mt.26:30; Col.3:16) or to give thanks for the loaf and cup. *Worship* seems to have more the divine Person Himself in mind, while *praise* is a more general term including our response to what He has done. The collection for the Lord's work when the *believers* are gathered together (1 Cor.16:1-2) seems to be a part of our sacrifice of praise.

Paul summarized the meeting for breaking bread in 1 Corinthians 11:23-26. The breaking of bread was instituted by the Lord Himself in the Gospels (Mt.26:26-30; Lk.22:14-20). Its intent is to have the *Lord Jesus* primarily before us -- to remember *Him*, to recall *Him* to mind, particularly in relation to *His* death. When we have this meeting we "proclaim the *Lord's* death till He comes" (v.26). We gather around *Him* at *His* request to remember *Him* because *He* is absent. *The focus is really rather narrow* -- something we should be more aware of when we give out hymns or give a word of praise or worship or thanksgiving. What a wonderful picture is given us of our adorable, blessed Lord Jesus each time we gather around Him to break the bread!

This meeting and the partaking of the bread and wine is *an act of the assembly*. It is the *communion* of the body and blood of Christ -- a collective participation (1 Cor.10:16-17). It is *never* seen as the act of an individual. But those who partake of this solemn supper are *individually* to be in a morally fit condition as seen in 1 Corinthians 11:27-34. This means that sins of the past week are self-judged so one can come before the Lord without having to have the *Lord* judge him. Partaking of the Lord's Supper is a holy matter and shouldn't be taken lightly! Note that these verses speak of those *already* in fellowship in the

Corinthian assembly: they do not speak of *reception* by the local assembly to the wondrous privilege. That is its own study, the subject, the Lord willing, of several future newsletters.

While other meetings can be held as often as desired, by apostolic example (Acts 20:7) we see that “on the first day of the week” the disciples came together for the express purpose of breaking bread. The Lord met with the gathered disciples on the first day of the week (Jn.20:19-20). Many groups meet monthly for the breaking of bread or communion service, as they call it, as if Acts 20:7 said “the first day of the month.” This lack of a weekly meeting would seem to indicate some lack of understanding or appreciation of the greatness of the Person who did such a work for us at Calvary’s cross! We too need the reminder.

PRAYER

The prayer meeting is an assembly meeting. Gift is not evident and the Holy Spirit is free to select among the brothers who will bring the needs of the assembly before the Lord. Acts 2:42 specifies it as a meeting of the assembly. Although there may be a *gift* of prayer (when we hear of people who devote their lives to it), in the prayer meeting it is a priestly function. All the brothers have *liberty* to pray but may not be directed of the Holy Spirit to do so at every prayer meeting. Dear brother, when you don’t pray in the assembly prayer meeting, be sure it is because you were not led to pray that week, not because you were careless or indifferent! See 1 Timothy 2:8 where the men (as opposed to the women) *are* to pray publicly.

The prayer meeting in the New Testament is first mentioned in Matthew 18:19. If even two *agree* on earth concerning anything they ask, the prayer will be answered, for “where two or three are gathered together in (unto) My name, I am there in the midst of them” (v.20). *Agreement* is a key issue in assembly prayer. We may at times fail to seek that agreement and our prayers go unanswered, *and we wonder why there is no power*. Instead of sticking to the items discussed and agreed upon, so often we have our own agenda and pray for everything else. Those prayers might be very appropriate at home between ourselves and the Lord, but are not suited to the assembly prayer meeting. The prayer meeting is also seen in Acts 4:24, 31.

There is no time limit on the prayer meeting, although long public prayers are condemned in Scripture (Mt.6:7; Mk.12:40). The longest recorded prayer of our Lord, in John 17, can be read in 3-5 minutes. So pray for those things the assembly has agreed upon instead of long “alphabet” prayers, perfectly suitable for one’s private times with the Lord! Also, the prayer meeting can be held as often as the brethren desire.

There may well be other times where individuals get together to pray, which may or may not be directly connected with the assembly (Acts 12:12). These prayer meetings would not be assembly meetings.

DISCIPLINE and RESTORATION OR RECEPTION

An assembly meeting for discipline is seen in 1 Corinthians 5:4-5, “In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, *when you are gathered together*, along with my spirit, *with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ*, deliver such an one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh ...”

The background of this case was an openly sexually-immoral Christian, in fellowship in the Corinthian assembly, who would not end and confess his sinful conduct. While individuals may act particularly for private sins (Mt.18:15-17; Gal.6:1-2), when the sin is not stopped, it becomes an assembly responsibility for discipline. No set of individuals in the Corinthian assembly was given the right to impose assembly discipline: *it was to be an act of the gathered assembly*. Paul in 1 Corinthians 5, 1 Thessalonians 5:14 and elsewhere gives *assemblies* instructions on how to act in discipline, even up to the extreme and final act of *excommunication* as seen in the case given in 1 Corinthians 5. Excommunication formally puts the person outside of the privileges of the local assembly. The Corinthian assembly was to “put away from among *yourselves* that wicked person” (v.13). They were not to keep company with such people; not even to eat with them until restoration (v.11). It would be wonderful if a local assembly never needed an assembly meeting for discipline.

Since only an assembly receives one to its fellowship and to the breaking of bread -- the outward expression of assembly fellowship -- this process would take place when the assembly was gathered "in assembly." It might not need a special meeting of the assembly, but could be carried out as an adjunct to another assembly meeting.

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