

# THE ASSEMBLY MESSENGER

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

Volume 98-20

Dear Reader

As we continue our study of reception to the breaking of bread, many questions arise. Some of these are, Should we receive any Christian who comes to the meeting for breaking bread? What if the Christian is known by someone to be *personally* godly, but is gathered with a group not meeting together on God's true ground?

Is the breaking of bread an isolated act of the individual, or a collective act? When received to break bread, is the person *effectively* in assembly fellowship with those seeking to gather to the Lord's name alone and seeking to maintain His order for the gatherings of His Church? Does such a person, when received, always come under the discipline of the assembly, which would have to judge a person who left and went back to an unscriptural "church" position? Should one be received who does not believe in the position and practices we seek to maintain? What are the Scriptural requirements for breaking bread? Are the moral and ecclesiastical (religious) *associations* of those with whom we break bread important, or are only their *personal* beliefs and practices important? Let us look to the Word of God for the answers and begin by looking at the different stages of the early Church to see the Scriptural progression in relation to reception.

## The Early Church (AD 30)

In the early Church "the Lord added *together* daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47, JND). All Christians expressed fellowship together in the breaking of bread. "They persevered in the teaching and *fellowship* of the apostles, in *breaking of bread* and prayers" (Acts 2:42, JND). By agreeing together with the apostles' doctrine, they were able to have true fellowship together with the apostles and the Lord. Those having such fellowship (having things in common) broke bread together; those who broke bread together could pray together in agreement. This verse defines our expressions of fellowship together. Note the order of progression: it is important! "Can two walk together unless they are agreed?" (Amos 3:3). God says that we break bread with those who agree together on the apostles' doctrine, not simply because they are Christians!

It is a wonderful fellowship together: meeting around the Lord Jesus, having fellowship with Him and with the apostles by meeting together according to the plan they by divine inspiration gave us. First and foremost, we see that we have been "called into the fellowship of His (God's) Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (1 Cor. 1:9).

It is a fellowship of the Lord Jesus Christ *and it is expressed outwardly by the partaking of the bread and the wine as members of the one body of Christ*. Scripture thus speaks of a universal fellowship of all believers — a fellowship that man's failure cannot alter. This fellowship was seen perfectly *practiced* by every Christian in Acts 2:42 and in 1 Corinthians 1:2.

Today, with Christians so outwardly divided, we will see that it is sadly no longer possible to have full practical assembly fellowship with all believers on the basis of this verse. Yet there is that bond of fellowship of 1 Corinthians 1:9 that we must never forget and must practice *as far as righteously possible* because of our common salvation. However, even though many Christians today refuse to have assembly fellowship together according to apostolic instructions and therefore are not maintaining the *apostles' fellowship*, those who agree together on the teachings of the apostles (including those teachings on the Church) still can have fellowship together in the breaking of bread, seeking to maintain the apostles' fellowship, even though it does not involve all believers.

Although the early Church soon was too large to meet in one location, and distances were too great, each local church (assembly) met together in the reality of their oneness as part of the one body of Christ and as the local

representation in their community or neighborhood of the whole Church. They maintained a practical unity in doctrine and practice as they gathered around Christ alone (Mt.18:20). They broke bread together as *the very outward expression of their fellowship together* (1 Cor.10:16-17)!

Therefore, as seen from the very beginning of the Church, the *primary* requirement for fellowship in the local assembly, for reception to the breaking of bread, is to be a divinely placed member of the body of Christ (Acts 2:47). JN Darby wrote in 1881, “The meeting for the breaking of bread is *in principle* the meeting together of all Christians in the unity of the body of Christ. Every Christian has a *right* to share in it. But at the same time, *in the present state of Christianity*, we are called to maintain scrupulously, faithfully, and with zeal, the *holiness* of the Lord’s table (2 Tim.2:22).” As a political example, in the United States, every person has the *constitutional right* to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,” yet one may spend an unhappy lifetime in jail or even be executed for breaking the laws established by that country. Even in the early Church, there was a vital requirement that could hinder the free expression of the primary requirement. This secondary requirement was *persevering in the apostles’ doctrine*. Only in that way was the “fellowship of the apostles” maintained. Wonderfully, the early believers of the Church *did* maintain the apostles’ doctrine and therefore could have real fellowship together.

#### ***The Requirements to Break Bread in the Early Church:***

- ***Be a Christian!***
- ***Persevere in the apostles’ doctrine.***

***At that time, all Christians were in agreement with, and sought to practice the Lord's will as to assembly fellowship.***

#### **The Corinthian Local Assembly (AD 55) — A Christian Excluded**

The early Church went on happily together for about 25 years. During that time there was one discordant note. As we saw in our study of *discipline*, Ananias and his wife Sapphira conspired to lie about giving to the Church the proceeds from the sale of some property (Acts 5:1-4). That was *unrighteousness* (not fundamental evil)! Yet, both died at the hand of God acting through His apostles, and “great fear came upon all the Church and upon all who heard these things” (Acts 5:11). The *Lord* maintained strict discipline in the Church, the house of God (1 Tim.3:15), until the *rules* for that house where God dwells (1 Cor.3:16) were better defined. Then the *responsibility* for discipline was placed in the hands of believers when gathered together. As we saw previously, *authority* was given to the local assembly to act in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor.5:4). See also Matthew 18:18. *Righteousness* was still to be maintained!

This brings us to the apostle Paul’s letter to the Corinthian local assembly about 25 years after the Church began at Pentecost (Acts 2). Paul had been given the assignment to make known the *mystery* of the Church (Eph.3:3-10). The Church was always in God’s mind, but was *hidden* from mankind (v.5) until Pentecost (Acts 2), although the Lord had hinted of it to His disciples (Mt.16:18). So Paul wrote to the Corinthian assembly to make known the proper functioning of a godly local assembly and to correct a number of sins that had crept in among them.

#### **Freedom from Moral Sin**

Although the Corinthians were still part of that universal oneness seen in practice in the early Church, their *thoughts* had become divisive (1 Cor.1:11-13; 3:3-4). Those divisive thoughts were the *mental* beginning of *denominationalism*. Further, there was another serious problem at Corinth. “It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles; that a man has his father’s wife” (1 Cor.5:1). Using that sin as the occasion to do so, Paul then proceeded to lay down new requirements for maintaining fellowship together — not new in the sense they weren’t important

before, but they hadn't been spelled out as relating to Church fellowship. The sinning man did not meet those requirements. "Therefore *put away from yourselves* that wicked person" (1 Cor.5:13). The new requirement was freedom from moral sin of the type described in Chapter 5. The Corinthian assembly could no longer have any fellowship with that sinning brother (or with those practicing other moral sins of the type defined) unless the sin was confessed and stopped. About a year later (2 Cor.2:5-11; 7:8-12) he was back in practical fellowship in the Corinthian assembly, the sin obviously having been confessed and stopped. The excommunication had its intended effect.

## Associations

In chapter 10, Paul stated another principle — actually an old principle seen throughout the Old Testament, but now strongly applied in the written Word of God to Church fellowship together. After expounding on the fellowship expressed in the breaking of bread, Paul stated, using Israel as an illustration of the principle, "*Are not those who eat of the sacrifices partakers of the altar?*" (1 Cor.10:18). Throughout the Old Testament the altar always stood for the *position* taken by those who sacrificed on it. For example, in 1 Kings 18 we have the altar of the Lord and (implied) the altar of Baal. Each stood for the principles maintained by those who sacrificed on it. So the *principle* stated in 1 Corinthians 10:18, in the context of the surrounding verses, is, *Are not you deeply associated with the ecclesiastical (church) position of those with whom you break bread?* We surely are! Paul then used a worst case example to illustrate his point. If one ate of an idol's sacrifice, *even without any intention of agreeing with the blasphemy represented by the idol*, it would be having fellowship with demons (who are behind the idols) as a result of the principle of *association*! So our religious associations, and some other types of associations also, are very important when it comes to with whom we can Scripturally break bread. We aren't calling those wrong religious associations "associating with demons": that is the worst-case *example* to prove the principle. When we break bread with those who maintain a wrong position, we "provoke the Lord to *jealousy*" (10:20). *Jealousy* means wanting to maintain what is rightly one's own. The next Newsletter will be devoted to studying this often-neglected principle of *associations*, found throughout God's Word.

1 Corinthians 5 — the chapter that put the immoral man out of fellowship — relates the principle of *association* with a number of forms of *unrepented* moral sin (the Greek assumes continued-in sin). It says, "Do you not know that *a little leaven leavens the whole lump?*" (1 Cor.5:6). Just as the action of yeast spreads throughout all the dough, *unless stopped by heat*, so *association* (fellowship) with sin — with the sinning person — will spread sin throughout a whole company of God's people unless stopped by assembly discipline, including excommunication, if necessary. Therefore, Paul wrote, "But now I have written to you *not to keep company* with anyone *named a brother*, who is a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; *not even to eat with such a person*. For what have I to do with judging those also who are *outside?* Do you not judge those who are *inside?*" (1 Cor.5:11-12). *We are responsible for those with whom we break bread (those inside)*, and are to judge whether breaking bread with them would associate us with moral sin of the *types* described! It is not an exclusive list of moral sins since there is a similar list in 2 Timothy 3 with different sins, and Timothy was to "turn away" from those practicing those sins.

Finally, in speaking of serious *doctrinal* error, Galatians 5:9 uses exactly the same words, "A little leaven leavens the whole lump." Serious doctrinal errors involve the Person and work of Christ, the Person and work of the Holy Spirit, and of the Person and work of the Father. Denial of doctrines such as the resurrection are counted as very serious (1 Cor.15:3,12-19,33-36; 2 Tim.2:18). The whole book of Galatians (where we have just seen that the principle of *leaven* or yeast is again given) is written to refute the false doctrine of law-keeping for Christians. That kind of doctrine spreads and defiles! These examples give us the *type* of doctrines that, when believed and taught, or associated with, should hinder fellowship.

As a modern example, the very false doctrine that Christ could have sinned has swept the Christian community

(2 Cor.5:21; 1 Pet.2:22). Others have Christ dying of exhaustion and heart failure as opposed to Him dismissing His own spirit (Mt.27:50; Jn.19:30) at the proper time, in full charge of His death (Jn.10:17-18).

Others have Him mentally struggling in the Garden of Gethsemane as to whether He would obey the Father and go to the cross. These types of false doctrines are from mainline evangelical writers, not those promoting some cult. Others deny His eternal Sonship. Think of the terrible charismatic sins, often attributing works of Satan to the Holy Spirit, that have swept millions of professed Christians under its wings. Major differences as to the principles of Church fellowship strike at the foundation of our fellowship together. Denominationalism, independency (autonomy of the local church), the clergy-laity system, are all serious doctrinal errors, completely foreign to God's Word, *which directly attack the functioning of God's Church as He intended*. How can one be associated in the breaking of bread with people who hold such errors, specially with people who have every intention of returning to where those errors are taught or practiced, *because they believe them to be correct, and ourselves wrong*? Association with both moral and doctrinal sin, defiles, and a godly believer cannot be indifferent!

Since many Christians don't think of the breaking of bread as part of being in church fellowship, and they don't understand the doctrine of associations, they have no conscience as to breaking bread with us or with any other Christian group, even though they don't agree with the position taken by that group. To them, one place may be as good as another if convenient at that moment. Their *motives and consciences* may be absolutely pure, *but they are wrong*: they are not following God's Word, and whether they realize it or not, they are associating us, by breaking bread with us, with their wrong doctrines and practices.

So, under the new conditions found in 1 Corinthians, we find two further requirements for breaking bread — for being found “inside,” for going on in the “apostles’ fellowship.” It not only is necessary to be a member of *the body of Christ*, but there must be proper behavior in *the house of God*.

#### ***Additional Requirements to Break Bread Brought Out in 1 Corinthians:***

- ***Be free from a course or practice of moral or doctrinal sin of the types described in Scripture as being defiling***
- ***Not be religiously associated with doctrinal or moral sin, or with an unscriptural religious position***

#### **Where Do We Go from Here?**

In the next Newsletter we want to study *associations* in detail. Then we want to see that the outward assembly conditions found in 1 Corinthians are *not current conditions*. Except for one man, it appears that all Christians were going on together in assembly fellowship at the time Paul wrote 1 Corinthians. A traveler could go to any city and ask where the Christians met and would be directed to an assembly going on in the apostles’ fellowship. His letter of commendation would be accepted there, for they would be walking on the same ground, believing and practicing the same truths as he believed and was practicing. But that sadly is not the case today. Christians now are spread across hundreds or even thousands of big and small “groups,” often with many splinter organizations, with a multitude of beliefs and practices.

God had one book written after such splintering began — 2 Timothy. Under those new conditions of outward disorder as to His Church, God gave even more restrictive requirements. These requirements are based on His holiness and righteousness. Since few people seem to see 2 Timothy in this light, we will devote a Newsletter to looking at the import of 2 Timothy, and then look at God's newest and final requirements for reception and assembly fellowship together under today's conditions. We trust these future Newsletters will be thought-provoking and that you will carefully search the Scriptures to determine whether what we say is true. If you believe it is true, then we earnestly pray that you will then act, or continue to act, on these truths.

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