

THE ASSEMBLY MESSENGER

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

Volume 01-48

Dear Younger Reader

QUESTION 4 CONTINUED: THE EARLY CHURCH IN PRACTICE (ACTS 2:41-47)

As we saw in the previous Messenger, the Church began on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4). What a day of preaching it was, as recorded in that second chapter! What was the result? What began as a group of 120 disciples grew by about 25 times!

Also in verse 41 we are told that “those who gladly received his (Peter’s) word were *baptized*,” as Peter had told them to do (v.38). Since the Jews were guilty of the death of Christ (Acts 2:23), they had to publicly *disassociate* themselves from Judaism and in baptism, come outwardly on new Christian ground. But it is plain that the Lord expects all those who profess to be His disciples to be baptized. The Lord’s order to His disciples, just before His ascension, was “Go therefore and *make disciples* of all the nations, *baptizing them* in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, *teaching them* to observe all things that I have commanded you” (Mt.28:19). Scripture shows baptism was practiced faithfully by the early Church (Acts 8:12-13, 36-38; 10:48; 16:14-15, 32-33; 18:18; etc.). To sum up, the blood of Christ cleanses us *judicially* from all sin (1 Jn.1:7) and baptism cleanses us *practically* (1 Pet.3:21). Baptism does not give anything *inward*, but is an *outward* expression — even to an *outward* washing away of sins (Acts 22:16) — before mankind. But, dear young reader, let us be true to our baptism. If you say you have died with Christ, buried with Him in baptism and have been raised up to walk in newness of life, then if you are true to the position you took, you will be saved *practically* from many pitfalls of this life, saved from your old sinful habits and saved from the bad influences of sinful worldly people around you.

“**And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine ...**” (Acts 2:42). You will remember we are told in Acts 1:3 that the Lord gave His disciples a crash course in “the things pertaining to the Kingdom of God” during the 40 days between His resurrection and ascension. We aren’t told the details, but we surely would expect it included what they needed to know about how God wanted His about-to-be-formed Church to function. So the functioning of the early Church was based on agreement with, and the practice of the apostles’ doctrine. *Doctrine* simply means what the apostles taught as to the Church and other things — God’s instructions. For example, the *doctrine of the resurrection* means all the Bible teaches concerning resurrection. Study for yourselves the seven doctrines concerning the Lord Jesus which Peter gave the Jews in verses 23-36.

“**... and fellowship**” (v.42). The Greek indicates it was the “*apostles’ fellowship*.” *Fellowship* means *having in common*. The 3000 believers, agreeing with what the apostles taught, were able to be together with them as *one* in actual practice. “Can two walk together unless they are agreed?” (Amos 3:3). But we *all* have been “called into the fellowship of ... Jesus Christ our Lord” (1 Cor.1:9). See also 1 John 1:3.

“**... in the breaking of bread and in prayers**” (v.42). The breaking of bread, the Lord’s supper (Lk.22:19-20; 1 Cor.11:23-26) is an ordinance of the Church. It is a simple act, but with far-reaching meaning and effect, being the outward expression of our fellowship together (1 Cor.10:16-22). We will study this in more detail later. The point is, in the order of presentation here, we break bread with those we are in fellowship with, with those who agree together on, and seek to follow, the apostles’ doctrine. Then, as an assembly, those in that condition can pray together and expect the Lord to hear and answer.

They “were *together*, and had all things in common” (v.44). The word *together* is very common in this early part of Acts. They had become a family, the family of God, one body, and they acted like it to the extreme. Their actions were a great expression of mutual love. We note that there were no *instructions* for them or us today to do what they did, in selling off their belongings and dividing them among the believers as need arose. It was God’s provision for the moment, for in a short time, “great persecution arose against the Church which was at Jerusalem, and they were scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria” (Acts 8:1). This scattering was God’s way to rapidly spread the gospel and the truth of His Assembly.

“They continued daily with one accord” (v.46). What a blessed oneness they felt and enjoyed. Finally, “And the Lord added *together* [to the Church] daily those who were being saved” (v.47). We don’t *join* a “church.” We already have been *added* by the Lord to the only Church found in Scripture. The Holy Spirit baptizes (enters) into one body (1 Cor.12:13). Many Greek scholars and trusted Bible teachers (JND notes, FWG Numerical Bible, William Kelly), the NASB, etc., tell us that “to the Church” in verse 47 has very little manuscript authority, but that the word should be *together* — emphasizing what was the reality of the newly-formed Church. We await Acts 5:11 to actually have the Greek word *ecclesia* used. But regardless of the translation, the fact was that they were added together, *to the Church*.

QUESTION 2: OUR GATHERING CENTER (MT.18:20)

Now, with the above background, we can go back and explain question 2. “If two of you shall agree on the earth concerning any matter ... it shall come to them from My Father who is in the heavens. For where two or three are gathered together *unto My name*, there am I in the midst of them” (Mt.18:19-20, JND translation). We have already seen that Matthew records the Lord’s words (16:18) as to the beginning of the Church — words spoken a short time before the Church actually began. Then in chapter 18 He in simple language announces the *prayer meeting* (v.19) where if even as few as *two* gather together to pray and are in agreement, the Father will answer that prayer (although it might not always be in the way we expected). We have also seen that prayer was a part of the functioning local assembly from the beginning (Acts 2:42). Then we come to that great verse 20, so little appreciated today.

“**Where two or three ...**” The prayer meeting is the platform used to announce a great truth. There can’t be a gathering with less than two, but God recognizes as few as two *gathered unto His name* as a local assembly, *with the promise of His presence in their midst* and with administrative authority to act for Him (v.18). Maybe in some town a husband and wife or two or three families are the only ones who will gather to Christ alone: the Lord will recognize their faithfulness. This is how every true-hearted believer is to gather “*with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart*” (2 Tim.2:22). It is so sad that so few will do so, preferring the ease and convenience of big but unscriptural denominational “churches” or other easy-going groups.

“**Are gathered together ...**” There is no blessing in staying home or otherwise not gathering with the believers “who call on the Lord out of a pure [undivided] heart.” We are 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 approaching” (Heb.10:24-25). This means getting involved, interacting, helping and being helped! This is an answer to question 30! God says, “Seek *first* the kingdom of God *and His righteousness*” (Mt.6:33). Yet how easily we stay away from the meetings of the assembly, compared to staying away from work or school! Do you fall into that group called “the manner of some is”? If so, you lose much! How will you excuse yourself to God?

“**Unto My name ...**” The Greek preposition *eis* can be translated by *in* or *to*: it depends on the context. The denominational translators of most Bible versions didn’t understand the concept of gathering around Christ in their midst, *to Him*. All Christians are “*in Christ*” (2 Cor.5:17, etc.) — it is Christian position. But *Christ* wants to be our *only gathering Center*. There is nothing whatever in Scripture to indicate that we should meet as Baptists, Lutherans, Roman Catholics, Churches of Christ, Plymouth Brethren, etc., but only as *Christians* — those who belong to Christ, gathered only to His Name! It is *His Church* (Mt.18:20)! He is its *Head* (Col.1:18). The name of the Lord Jesus Christ stands for all He is. I’ve used the illustration of people invited *to* a housewarming: that is what they come for. A repairman may be *in* the house at the same time, but he is not gathered *to* the housewarming party. See the difference?

“**There am I in the midst of them.**” This is not a geometry problem, but a spiritual reality. Although a Man in glory, the Lord Jesus is God and thus not limited to one location: He is *omnipresent*, one of the inherent attributes of deity. It always was His desire to be in the midst of His people. He wanted to commune with Adam (Gen.3:8-10). The Children of Israel in the wilderness camped around the tabernacle with God in their midst (Ex.25:8; Num.2:1). Israel willingly put God at their center, everyone taking their proper place around Him as He directed (Num.2:3-31). After His resurrection He twice came into the midst of His gathered disciples (Jn.20:19, 26). He said, “I will come to you” (Jn.14:18). And even in the future eternal state, He will dwell *with* His people (Rev.21:3; Jn.14:3; 1 Thes.4:17). He likewise wants to be

recognized and appreciated as in the midst of His gathered assemblies. Isn't it wonderful, remarkable, to know He is in our midst when gathered to Him?

We cannot make pronouncements about believers who gather to human religious centers. They may *individually* enjoy the Lord's personal presence as in John 14:23, "If *anyone* loves Me, *he* will keep My words; and My Father will love *him*, and We will come to *him* and make Our home with *him*." But they have no *promise* of the Lord's presence when gathered together.

When gathered only to His name, we leave behind the great systems of men which are organized to run smoothly by human arrangement and thus cater in different degrees to please the flesh (the Adamic nature) while hopefully having something for the spirit (new nature). But we are to allow the *Lord* to control things as He pleases in His assemblies.

QUESTION 6: OTHER USES OF THE GREEK WORD ECCLESIA

Acts 19:32,39,41 illustrate uses for *ecclesia* that do not refer to the *Lord's* Church. "The assembly was confused" (v.32). What assembly? An unruly mob *called out* of the general population to defend the goddess Diana. "It shall be determined in a lawful assembly" (v.39). Here, it is a court, a group of people *called out* of the general population to ascertain the truth according to law. "He dismissed the assembly" (v.41). Here again it was the unruly mob. Acts 7:38, "in the *ecclesia* in the wilderness," refers to the Old Testament congregation of Israel in the wilderness, *called out* by God from the surrounding nations. In all other uses in the New Testament, *ecclesia* refers to the *Lord's* Church or Assembly, a new thing entirely, found only in the New Testament.

QUESTION 10: THE MYSTERY

Romans 16:25-26 speaks of a "mystery kept secret since the world began, but now has been made manifest." In Ephesians 3:3-10 the mystery was made known to the apostles, "that the Gentiles should be fellow-heirs, of the same body ... that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the Church ..." Colossians 1:24-27 make it clear the *Church* is spoken of. There also are several other *mysteries* in the New Testament not directly related to the Church. A mystery in the Bible is not something eerie, mysterious, but a truth of Scripture, always in God's mind, but not revealed till the New Testament was given. Although we can now look back and see pictures (often called *types*) of Christ and His Church (note Adam and Eve, Joseph and his Gentile bride, etc.), no one in Old Testament times even thought of the Church where Gentiles, along with Jews, would be fellow-heirs and as close together as parts of a human body.

QUESTION 11: ECCLESIA USED IN TWO DIFFERENT WAYS

We've touched on this before. There is the Church universal (Mt.16:18; Eph.5:25; etc.) which the *Lord* was to build. Every true believer today is a part of that universal Church. Think of a giant corporation like Ford Motor Co. (since I worked in the automotive industry). Ford's world-headquarters is in Dearborn where I live. But Ford has branch offices or dealerships in most big cities, many smaller ones too, around the world. And they all represent in their local areas the parent company. Likewise, God's plan for His Church is that, although headquartered in heaven where its *Head* sits at the Father's right hand, it has branch offices — local churches or assemblies — in thousands of cities and towns around the world (1 Cor.1:2; Gal.1:2; Rev.2-3; etc.). These *should* represent the plan and directions of Christ the Head. These assemblies are *people* gathered together, collectively seeking to walk as Christ gives them directions through His Word, maintaining a local testimony for Him and His Church. Thus, Paul could say of the Corinthian local assembly, "You are body of Christ and members individually" (1 Cor.12:27). They weren't *the* body of Christ (note the JND translation), but were part of it, representing it locally. The problem is, the religious groups all around us have gotten far away from God's pattern — so much so, that it today seems strange and unworkable ... and even undesirable! But God's pattern hasn't changed, nor has our responsibility to it lessened!

Therefore, to answer the first part of question 11, the instructions given to the Corinthian assembly were equally the instructions for all local assemblies because all are the part of the one true Church, not *independent* of what was going on in other local assemblies. Most evangelical churches and groups today are based on the false principle of *independency* — what goes on in one "church" is no business of any other "church" or group. But that is not what God intended or intends!

Many writers, including me, use the convention of capitalizing the word *ecclesia* when it refers to the Assembly as a whole — all the called-out ones, wherever found — and use the lower case when referring to the local assembly, the representation of the Assembly in a community.

QUESTIONS 13,15,19,20,21,23,24,25,27,35: THE PICTURE-EXAMPLES OF THE CHURCH

Well! Lots of questions will be answered at once! The New Testament is full of these picture-examples, hence the many questions as to them. One of the names or picture-examples of the Church is found in Romans 16:16, “The churches *of Christ* greet you.” The whole Church belongs to Christ, so each local assembly (as simply a local representative of the whole Church) also belongs to Him. The thought is clearly one of *ownership*. He “gave Himself for it” (Eph.5:25). It is not *our* Church where *we* make up the rules, but *Christ’s* Church. Each local assembly is to act according to the Owner’s directions. In 1 Corinthians 1:2; 11:16, 22; and elsewhere, we also have the expression “Church (or, *churches*) of *God*.” In 1 Timothy 3:15 the expression is expanded upon — “the Church of the *living* God.” Of course, Christ is God, but the emphasis here again is on *divine ownership* by a God who is living and powerful, fully aware of our day-by-day activity in relation to His Church. He expects us to know how we should conduct ourselves in our daily “assembly” activities and will hold us responsible for doing so.

The Body of Christ

Perhaps the best known of the pictures that God uses to describe the greatness and uniqueness of His Church is the expression *body of Christ*. The picture is of a *person* — one wonderful unity — with each part of the body working together to fulfill the desires of the head. So Christ “is the Head of the body, the Church” (Col.1:18); “the Church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all” (Eph.1:22-23). Just as the human head gives character to the whole person and gives direction and food to the body, and controls the body, so Christ desires to give character to the Church and control it by the directions He gives. We fail when we do not “hold the Head” (Col.2:19), but seek our directions and spiritual food elsewhere. Just as the human body is always complete, although not necessarily fully matured, so the body of Christ is always looked at as complete on earth at any one time.

We get the greatest expounding of the truth of the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12:12-31. The body is *one* (unity) but has many members — pictured by the thousands of parts and millions of cells of the human body, all working in harmony together. So is *the* Christ (v.12, JND) — Christ and His Church. *Unity* under the direction of Christ our Head is a main feature of this picture. How it must sadden the Lord to see His Assembly not functioning as He, its Head, intended it to function!

How did we become a part of the one body? We were *baptized* [immersed, entered] by the Holy Spirit into it (v.13). Each part of the body is necessary and we are set in the body to function as it pleased God, and we are not to complain, but are to seek to please our Head in the position He has placed us (vv.15-26). Maybe I’m just a piece of cartilage holding a rib to the sternum, unseen and unappreciated, but Oh how necessary for the functioning of the body! As many football players know, damaging that cartilage is *terribly* painful and disabling. As we saw above, the Corinthians were *of* the body of Christ. They didn’t comprise all of it, but were a part of that living organism. Further, each individual was a member (v.27). God has sovereignly placed spiritual gifts and gifted people in the body that it may function properly for Him (vv.28-31). We will study this later.

The Bride of Christ

Probably second in recognition of all the pictures of the true Church is the expression *bride of Christ*. In 2 Corinthians 11:2 we are told that Paul (by his preaching) has “betrothed you to one husband that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ.” Here we believers are seen as bindingly-engaged to Christ for a future day of presentation at the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev.19:7-8). Other families (v.9) such as Old Testament believers and Tribulation believers — the friends of the Bridegroom (Jn.3:29) — will be called to the marriage supper, but only the Church is “married” to Christ.

In Ephesians 5 we see the divine features of an earthly marriage between a man and woman are simply a reflection of the relationship of Christ and His Church (5:32). Christ is the *Head* of His Church (not here, the *body*) so the husband is the

head of the wife. “Therefore, just as the Church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything” (vv.22-24). Christ loves His Church and wants her to be pure when He presents her to Himself to be His bride. So the Lord nourishes (spiritually feeds) and cherishes (cares for, holds dear, shows affection to) His Church (vv.25-29). The Lord longs for that day when He and His Church will be together forever (v.31).

Let’s go in our minds at least seven years into the future, to the end of the Great Tribulation during which God brings great trial on those who rejected Christ. That seven years approximates the interval between the rapture of the Church to heaven and the coming of Christ to reign over the earth. When the time of the Great Tribulation is about finished, we see Christ about to come to put down all opposition and to reign, but first, there needs to be the official “marriage” of the Lamb (Rev.19:7-9). So, in answer to the last part of Question 35, the Church *does* again appear in Revelation, after chapter 3! His *wife*, the Church, is ready, having been dressed in the beautiful acts of righteousness she had done for her beloved Lord, as displayed at the Judgment Seat of Christ (1 Cor.3:11-15). Then He and His beloved wife are seen returning towards earth from heaven (Rev.19:11-16), but He alone does the fighting. Note that in this paragraph we have used the term *wife*. The distinction between *bride* and *wife* is small but important and will be covered in the next Newsletter with the next term, *The Wife of Christ*. RPD