

Gathered Together to Remember the Lord

The conversation usually goes like this: "Where do you go to Church?" "An Assembly of Christians gathers in our house to remember the Lord." "Do you do the preaching?" "Not exactly, we do not rely upon any one man to direct our meeting. We gather on Sunday evening to break bread and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, Do this in remembrance of me." "You have the Lord's Supper *every* Sunday?" "Every Sunday!" A look of genuine puzzlement or concern then comes over the individual, and they cease to ask any more questions.

I feel no need to defend the way I worship. I believe the Bible alone is my rule for faith and practice; and I believe I worship in a scriptural way. But I sorrow over the fact that many Christians think it strange that believers would want to assemble together weekly for the Lord's Supper. This is the pattern in scripture. Why would believers want to do any differently? I propose then, four questions for your careful reflection. *First*, what was the primary reason for which Christians gathered together in the New Testament? *Second*, what was the manner of their meeting? *Third*, how is it different from the way in which many meet today? And *finally*, what difference does it make?

FIRST, WHAT WAS THE PRIMARY REASON FOR WHICH CHRISTIANS GATHERED TOGETHER IN THE NEW TESTAMENT?

*"And on the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread"
(Acts 20:7)*

The primary reason believers gathered together was to remember the Lord Jesus in his supper. At the very beginning of the Church, while the disciples were still meeting in the temple in Jerusalem, they met daily in homes for this purpose (Acts 2:42, 46). Later, they met on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2). This remembrance of the Lord was at first celebrated together with a common meal (Acts 2:46). It is the abuse of the common meal in conjunction with the Lord's Supper that moves Paul to severely admonish the Corinthian Church. He says that they "come together not for the better but for the worse" (1 Corinthians 11:17). When the Corinthians assembled there was disorder and unbrotherly behavior at the table (verse 21). Their gluttony at the common meal obstructed their reason for coming together, so that Paul could say, "Therefore when you meet together, it is *not* to eat the Lord's Supper" (1 Corinthians 11:20). However, this abuse does not justify changing the New Testament custom of meeting on the first day of the week to have the Lord's Supper. In fact, Paul's antidote for the Corinthians is to stop the abuse, not the meeting (1 Corinthians 11:28, 33-34).

SECOND, WHAT WAS THE MANNER OF THEIR MEETING?

"Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ?" (1 Corinthians 10:16)

The manner of the Church's meeting in the New Testament was a simple remembrance of the Lord by sharing a cup of wine and broken bread (*cf.*, Matthew 26:26-30; Mark 14:22-26; Luke 22:14-23; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26). The focal point is the remembrance of the Lord Jesus. The bread points to his giving his body for us. The wine points to his shedding of blood for our sins.

The statement by our Lord, "Do this in remembrance of me," implies, does it not, that it is easy for us to forget him. Indeed, this is the Corinthians' sin. They come together. They eat; but they forget the Lord in it. This is our sin too. We come together. We do our programs. We play at "Church." But where is Christ? When do we remember and commune with our dear Lord? Our Lord tells us to remember him, to show forth his death, to show forth our union with him in the Lord's Supper. And yet, many forget him, and consider service to his commands boring and ritualistic. I have found it not uncommon for many Churches to seldom have the Lord's Supper. It is an unhappy departure from the biblical pattern. More than that, it is an invitation for Christians to forsake a frequent cherishing of the person of the Lord Jesus.

THIRD, HOW WAS THEIR REMEMBRANCE OF THE LORD DIFFERENT FROM THE WAY IN WHICH CHURCHES MEET TODAY?

"What is the outcome then, brethren? When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification." (1 Corinthians 14:26)

In the context of the Lord's Supper, other things took place too. There was attendance to God's Word and prayer (Acts 2:42). There was opportunity to exercise spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 14:26). The primary focus, however, was the Lord's Supper.

Many today would not be comfortable with the way the New Testament Church met for the Lord's Supper. It was a meeting without an ordained clergy presiding. It had no liturgy. There were no time limitations. There was great freedom in the Holy Spirit superintending the meeting.

Some have remarked that if the Apostle Paul attended a Church meeting in most Churches today, he would not be recognized as a Church member, nor be admitted to the table, nor allowed to speak a word to the saints. Our services have no room for the freedom of the Spirit to edify by whomever he chooses. We have largely programmed the Holy Spirit out of our meetings.

To try to recapture the New Testament emphasis upon the leading of the Holy Spirit in the meeting of the Church invites, in our day, the criticism of being "charismatic." While acknowledging that our Charismatic brethren are indeed members of Christ's body, we

would state our simple preference for the primacy of the written word of God over miraculous gifts that were given as confirming signs to the early Church.

Rather than unbridled emotional fervor, there is great emphasis in 1 Corinthians upon customs and Assembly order. Paul makes clear some of the rules regulating the use of miraculous gifts. For example, the use of tongues and prophecy had to conform to certain rules (1 Corinthians 14:27-31). In addition, women were not permitted to speak in the Assembly (1 Corinthians 14:33-35). Note the emphasis upon orderliness and calm deliberation (14:30,32,33,40). Nevertheless, the Spirit, in the New Testament Assembly, had freedom to speak through any of the men whom he had gifted (1 Corinthians 14:30).

The openness and freedom of God's Spirit in the meeting of the Church is precluded in most Church structures. Pastors, accustomed to controlling and dictating a man-made form and order, know nothing of allowing the Holy Spirit to lead his gifted men in the meeting. A "non-structured" meeting is a threatening and unknown variable. Ministers are greatly afraid of men saying something inane, or that there might be unnerving moments of silence. This betrays the fact that they have little faith in the practical manifestation of Christ's headship or the Holy Spirit's teaching ministry. They labor under the fallacy of a professional ministry based on an Old Testament priesthood.

The New Testament picture of ministry is much different. Christ provides certain gifted men to the Church, so that the saints might be perfected, and they, the saints at large, in turn do the work of the ministry and build up Christ's Church (Ephesians 4:11-12). This was Tyndale's understanding of Ephesians 4:12 "that the sainctes might have all things necessarie to work and minister withall." There is no distinction of "clergy" and "laity" in the New Testament. Any understanding of ministry that includes such a distinction is an alteration of the New Testament view of ministry.

In 1 Corinthians 10-14 we have some indications of what the Assembly meeting should be, in contrast to the misuse of it by the Corinthians. A pastor once confided in me that he was uneasy using the Corinthian Church as a pattern for worship, a Church which had so many problems (as though our modern Churches are beyond these difficulties!). He asked, "How can you make these chapters your pattern when many of these miraculous gifts have ceased?" But the emphasis in these chapters is not upon miraculous powers or transient sign gifts, but upon the presence of the Holy Spirit. Is the Holy Spirit still among us? Is he still the Great Teacher of the Church? Can he still edify the Lord's Church by whom he pleases? Can he still act as Christ's vicar in the Church's meeting? I believe the answer is yes.

It is wrong for us to ignore the very core of scriptural teaching on Assembly life and substitute something of our own making. The closest thing we have for a scriptural order for a Church meeting is found in 1 Corinthians 10-14. Should we not be content with it?

FINALLY, WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE?

If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord's commandment. (1 Corinthians 14:37)

The difference is simply: Do we follow the scriptures, or invent our own way? Men have a proclivity to trifle with the Word of God and invent new things. It is far easier to adhere to man-made forms than the power and leading of God's sweet Spirit.

The difficulties we face in enacting scriptural principles are of our own making. We stumble over rocks we lay in our path. We set up our Churches according to the traditions of men, and then marvel at how hard it is to affect spiritual change in them. But Christ *is still* the Head of his Church, and the Holy Spirit *is still* the Great Teacher of Christ's Church, and any who look to him for instruction and strength will receive it abundantly. But beware, there is another spirit--one which glories in outward form and ceremony, and is not at rest until we abide in our own opinion, and in the strength of our own imagination.

It is our Lord's desire that we meet to remember Him. Whatever else we do as a Church, it must be of secondary importance to "Do this in remembrance of Me." If the modern Church is to be a source of blessing and a force of good in the world, it must return to its First Love.

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Scott Branyan
14252 Sunset Drive
Rogers, AR 72758 USA
75013.1240@compuserve.com

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For more information, you may also write to:

SEDIN
P.O. Box 126
17244 Cassà de la Selva (Girona)
SPAIN
www.sedin.org
info@sedin.org