

## A DEFINITION OF THE CHURCH

The meaning of "church", *ekklesia*, is outcalling. It is not the kind of a word that can apply to a building, nor is it ever used in the New Testament to describe an organization made up of a number of congregations which have been organized together to form a denomination.

"Church" occurs in the Authorized Version of the New Testament 115 times. Three times it refers to a municipal meeting in the city of Ephesus (Acts 19:32,39), once it refers to Israel (Acts 7:38), the other 111 times it refers either to the church which is the body of Christ (Eph 1:22, 23), or to a church in a locality made up of a company of believers who meet regularly in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ as a church of God. We must determine which of the two aspects of the church is in the text by the context.

### THE CHURCH WHICH IS HIS BODY

In Matthew 16:18, the church Christ would build was still future. The simple future tense of the verb "will build" should settle for everyone that the church did not exist before the Day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit baptized believers into the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:13). This was a new beginning and brought into being the spiritual body of Christ (Eph 1:22-23; 2:19-22). It is called, "the church which is His body", "a holy temple in the Lord" and "a habitation of God through the Spirit".

The "body of Christ" is made up of all believers in this church age. All who have been saved in this day of grace have been baptized by the Spirit into the body. This is not a privilege that is reserved for believers who are spiritually advanced beyond others, for even the Corinthians, who were said to be carnal, were "all baptized into one body...and had all been made to drink into one Spirit" (1 Cor 12:13).

This age is a parenthesis in God's prophetic programme for the ages, an indeterminate period of time that cannot be found in the Old Testament. The great time prophecies of the Old Testament (Lev 23:4 -44; Dan 9:24-27), and the parables of the mystery aspect of the kingdom in the New Testament (Matt 13:1-58), make it clear that the rejection of the King and His death on the cross, stopped the clock of prophecy at the end of the 69th heptad, 483 years from the "going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem" (Dan 9:25). "Messiah was cut off, but not for Himself" (v 26). The remainder

of the prophetic programme awaits the 70th heptad, which we identify as the "time of trouble" (Dan 12:1), "the great tribulation" (Rev 7:14).

This "age of the Spirit" or "church age" is not part of the divine plan of the ages which centres around God's purposes for Israel, the earthly people He has chosen. In spite of the one use of the word "church" for Israel (Acts 7:38), Israel was never the church. Stephen's use of the word is merely saying that Israel, called out of Egypt to the Lord in the wilderness were also a "called out" people. Those who were saved out of Israel in early days of testimony, or are saved up to this present day, cease to be part of Israel and become members of the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:13; Eph 2:14-22).

This parenthetic "church age" fulfills the purpose of God to take out of the Gentiles a people for His name (Acts 15:14). Whatever we see happening in God's purposes for Israel are no more than "coming events casting their shadows before them".

### THE CHURCH OF GOD—AN ASSEMBLY OF BELIEVERS

The first mention of an assembly of believers in Scripture is found in the words of the Lord in Matthew 18:15-20. Using "the law of first mention" as a key to understanding Scripture, we can confidently say that this first mention of an assembly contains major features of assembly truth as it is later developed in the Acts, 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy.

Never are a number of assemblies joined together and called, The Church of anything. There are only two aspects of the church in the NT: the "church which is His body" and a "church of God". In the 13 times that this latter term is used, it can be shown that it always refers to a single assembly in a given locality. This is even true of its use by Paul in Galatians 1:13, because the only assembly in existence at that time was the church at Jerusalem even though its members were scattered as far away as Damascus (Acts 8:1).

We have no quarrel with the word "church", but prefer to use "assembly" for a local company because "church" has at least two very common wrong uses in the religious world. It is frequently used for a building, which it can never be, nor can it be used for an organization, a confederation of congregations that have joined together and taken a denominational name to distinguish them from the rest of the professing church.

When a number of assemblies are being described, they may be called:

1. Churches of God—their purpose.
2. Churches of Christ—their Lord.
3. Churches of saints—their composition.
4. Churches of Gentiles—their background.
5. Churches of Galatia—their location.

## ONE DISTINCTIVE NAME—LORD JESUS CHRIST

Matthew 18:20 is the truth of an assembly in the same way that John 3:16 is the truth of the Gospel. We do not question that John 3:16 is a wonderful and full statement of Gospel truth, yet it says nothing directly about sin, repentance or justification. Matthew 18:20 does not detail every facet of assembly truth, but it is a beautiful comprehensive statement that is in full agreement with all that the New Testament reveals about an assembly.

In this first mention of an assembly are four precious truths about the one name in which an assembly is gathered.

The Authority of His name.

The Uniqueness of His name.

The Attraction of His peerless name.

The Exclusion of every other name.

Because the background of this great verse is an offence and a matter of church discipline, it is good to compare it to just such a meeting in the assembly at Corinth. Paul wrote, “In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, to deliver such an one...” (1 Cor 5:4). In both cases, the prominent features are: 1. an assembly gathered; 2. in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ; 3. with the authority and presence of the Lord Jesus promised. These are features of every assembly gathering.

A brief, closer look at Matthew 18:20 is necessary:

“For where two or three are”—a meeting is taking place.

“Having been gathered together”—it is a meeting of an assembly that has been gathered as a permanent testimony, called the church (v 17), that has at a time in the past been gathered together by a power outside of themselves. This perfect passive participle means that they did not gather themselves. We are assured that God (the Holy Spirit) is the Gatherer John 4:23; Acts 15:14; 1 Cor 3:6).

“In My name”—The Gathering Centre is the Lord Jesus Christ. “In (or unto) His name” means attraction to His Person and the recognition of His supreme authority in the gathering.

“There am I in the midst of them”—His abiding presence is promised. The two words that are translated “in” are different, but closely related. The only way that we can be assured of the second “in” is to have experienced the first “in”. Unless we have been gathered out by God from the world and its systems and all that is merely man-made, and been gathered unto the name of the Lord Jesus Christ alone, we cannot claim His presence in the midst. This is the very plain definition of a New Testament assembly.

## FOUR OBJECTIONS TO THIS USE OF MATTHEW 18:20

1. Does not contain all the truths about an assembly.
2. No assembly existed when the words were spoken.
3. It is a personal offence, not assembly fellowship.
4. This is a case of discipline.

Objections 1, 2 and 4 are true, but this does not subtract from the importance of this verse. It does not contain all the truth of an assembly, but it is the truth in embryo. No assembly existed at this time, but anyone reading Matthew's Gospel with care knows that from chapter 11, where the King is rejected, the Lord Jesus gives truth for the time when He will be absent.

It is humbling to us that the first teaching of assembly truth is against a background of human failure; one brother has caused offence to another. But it also encourages us to know that in spite of sin and failure, God can and has maintained testimony to His name. The one sheep that went astray (v 12), is sought diligently by the one, two or three. If they had succeeded in his recovery, there would have been great rejoicing. In the refusal of the straying one to hear them or to hear the church, there was great sorrow.

This offence was initially personal and could have been settled between the two participants, but when this failed, it became a matter of seeking shepherds. When this effort failed, it became a church matter, and when the offender would not hear the church, discipline was necessary.

It can be argued that the two or three witnesses (v 16) are the same brethren that prayed, and met in verse 20. This means that the meeting together of verse 20 was a meeting of church shepherds (v 12-14), the smallest meeting of an assembly. If this is true, then it can be stated that what is true of the smallest meeting is also true of all assembly meetings, that is, that the gathering is in His name and the Lord Himself is in the midst.

## TEN DESCRIPTIVE NAMES FOR AN ASSEMBLY

1. Church of God, 1 Cor 1:2,	Its purpose
2. Tillage of God, 1 Cor 3:9,	Its planting.
3. Building of God, 1 Cor 3:9,	Its pattern.
4. Temple of God, 1 Cor 3:16,	Its praise
5. Body of Christ, 1 Cor 12:27,	Its provision.
6. Chaste virgin, 2 Cor 11:2,	Its purity.
7. Little flock, Acts 20:28,	Its pathway.
8. House of God, 1 Tim 3:15,	Its principles of rule.
9. Pillar of truth, 1 Tim 3:15,	Its proclamation.
10 Golden lampstand Rev 1:20,	Its profession.

## THE PATTERN FOR AN ASSEMBLY

A Christian home should be a model of godliness and should have the ideal atmosphere for the training of our children. Actually, our children are taught by three methods. We teach principles to them that come from the Scriptures. What a privilege for a mother and father to pour into the ears and hearts of their young children divine principles of truth and morality! The distinction between right and wrong is almost entirely missing in public education. Teachers are frequently forbidden to teach value judgments, so more necessary than ever is the home influence. We also teach our children by precepts. These commands should be based on the principles we teach and be in agreement with them. But when we have thoroughly given our children the right principles and precepts, they are in need of a pattern that is in harmony with the principles and precepts. In many homes, a pattern of godly, unselfish living for the sake of the Lord Jesus and the needs of others is missing.

God teaches by the same three principles. The doctrines are in agreement with the precepts. God never asks for meaningless compliance. All His commands have deep spiritual meaning and are for our good always. However, God has also given us the perfect moral pattern of the lowly Saviour whose footsteps as a Man brought delight to the heart of the Father (1 Pet 2:21).

### HOW IMPORTANT IS A PATTERN?

Acts 2:41-42 is God's pattern for a New Testament assembly. Each of the seven divine principles and practices of these two verses are used in 1 Corinthians. Again and again, Paul used the pattern to point out the wrong in Corinth and to correct it. Paul appealed to this preservation to the Ephesian elders, "I commend you to God and the Word of His grace" (Acts 20:32).

It is impossible to keep to the pattern and make little of the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is preeminent in an assembly because He is preeminent in the pattern.

An example of the difference between a precept and a pattern is: Precept: "This do in remembrance of Me until I come" (1 Cor 11:24). Pattern: "On the first day of the week the disciples came together to break bread" (Acts 20:7).

Does a precept have more importance than a pattern? When NT doctrine, precepts and patterns agree, they have equal authority.

An example of a practice without a precept is found in Acts 2:44, where the believers in Jerusalem shared all their possessions and no man claimed

any personal property. It was a necessity for the conditions of that time, but 1 Thess 4:11-12 and 2 Thess 3:6-15 forbid it. There are many examples of a principle, precept and pattern working in harmony. One example is the way Ephesians teaches "good works":

Principle: "We are His workmanship" Eph 2:10.

Precept: "Walk as children of light" Eph 5:8.

Pattern: "As Christ also loved us" Eph 5:1.

### GOD'S DESCRIPTION OF THE PATTERN ASSEMBLY

There were apostles and prophets in the first assembly and we have none today, but we do have the ministry of these foundation gifts in the New Testament. The assemblies in Achaia and Macedonia were patterned after the assemblies in Judea (1 Thess 2:13-14). The seven principles found in Acts 2:41-42 are still the pattern.

Salvation, baptism and reception to an assembly take place in this order; it is a divine order (Acts 18:8). It is no more scriptural to put reception before salvation than it is to put baptism after reception. The Acts and Epistles give ample proof of this divine order.

The four things of verse 42 all have a definite article. The apostle's teaching, the fellowship, the breaking of bread and the prayers are each particularly related to assembly order and practice.

We can humbly thank God that we have the apostles' doctrine preserved to us in God's Word and we have no reason or right to change any of the great truths that are revealed in it. Assemblies must and do believe and teach from the inspired and inerrant Holy Scriptures the Holy Trinity, the undiminished deity and impeccable humanity of the Lord Jesus, the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit, the efficacy of the precious blood, the physical resurrection of the Lord Jesus, His present ministry and His promised coming and kingdom. This is true orthodoxy, the faith once for all delivered to the saints that has been preserved through the centuries.

"The fellowship" of Acts 2:42 is described in detail in 1 Corinthians 10:14-32. It is based on the fellowship of children with the Father and His Son, but is distinct in that an assembly is a unique expression of it. Even though fellowship is a great spiritual truth, it has visible expressions in an assembly. It is based on the value of the precious shed blood and is expressed in the one cup and one loaf at the table of the Lord. It can also be seen in the "within" of an assembly (1 Cor 5:13), and even in the circle of believers who gather around with the Lord in the midst at the Lord's supper.

They "continued steadfastly" in the fellowship in contrast to occasional or spasmodic sharing. We have departed from the pattern when we encour-

age occasional fellowship. No privilege, such as partaking of the Lord's supper should ever be enjoyed apart from corresponding responsibilities.

In "Gathering Unto His Name", a book of 250 pages that is still available from Christian book dealers, the author of this booklet expressed wonder that Dr. C. I. Scofield, in his well known reference Bible, gives such an accurate description of a New Testament assembly (C. I. Scofield, Phil 1:1, note). Obviously, his definition came from the New Testament and not from the denomination to which he belonged, and this is to be admired.

The following is a simple summary of the order and practices of an assembly as seen in the NT and may be helpful to the reader.

### WHAT IS AN ASSEMBLY?

An assembly is a company of baptized believers (Acts 2:41), gathered unto the name of the Lord Jesus Christ (Matt 18:20; 1 Cor 1:1-9; 5:4), who meet regularly in a particular locality according to the pattern found in the New Testament in Acts 2:41,42, and developed fully in such Epistles as 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy. Such an assembly is a spiritual fellowship (1 Cor 10:16,17), which is expressed visibly as they meet for the breaking of bread, prayer, collective testimony, the teaching of the Word of God and the preaching of the gospel. They have been gathered together by the Holy Spirit (Mark 14:13; Rom. 8:14), their sole authority is the Word of God (2 Tim 3:16, 17), and they have the promise of the Lord Jesus Christ to be in their midst (Matt 18:20). They are a residence of the Holy Spirit on earth, so they are a holy temple unto the Lord (1 Cor 3:15, 16). Such an assembly is guided by godly overseers and served by faithful deacons in both a temporal and spiritual ministry (1 Tim 3:1-16). The priesthood of all believers is exercised in worship, praise and prayer, and the gifts, given by the risen Head of the church (Eph 4:8-13) have liberty to function under the control of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 14:23-40). There is a clear line of demarcation between the within and the without of an assembly and purity is maintained by a careful, compassionate and godly exercise of discipline (1 Cor 5:1-13).

This is a carefully written statement, but the reader should examine each passage of Scripture in the references and learn from the Word of God the truth of an assembly gathering. Our statements are only valuable in the degree that they teach Holy Scripture. It is only the Word of God that has authority in the realm of testimony for God.

There are varying degrees of conformity to the Word of God in the lives of believers and in the order and practices of companies of saints. The following are some principles that are unique to a New Testament assembly.

## **12 UNIQUE THINGS ABOUT AN ASSEMBLY.**

1. The entity, uniqueness and autonomy of the local church in distinction from the body. It has a within and without and is made up of a number of believers who are known to each other and to elders because they regularly meet (1 Cor 5:12,13; Acts 2:41, 42; 1 Cor 1:1-9; 3:9-17; 2 Cor 6:16).
2. The uniqueness of the name of the Lord Jesus; and the exclusion of every other name in which an assembly gathers. Second names are a denial that His name is above every other name (Matt 18:15-20; 1 Cor 1:1-2,10; 5:4; Phil 2:9-11).
3. Local government by the Word of God under a plurality of elders, raised up by the Holy Spirit. An assembly is a Theocracy where God rules, not a democracy with majority rule (Acts 20:28; 1 Tim 3:1-7; Titus 1:6-9).
4. The practice of NT priesthood (Rom 12:1-8; 1 Cor 14:26-39; 1 Pet 2:5).
5. The recognition of spiritual gifts and liberty for their function. One man ministry and all men ministry denied. There must be a gifted ministry under the control of the Holy Spirit (Rom 12:6-8; 1 Cor 12:1-11; 28-31; Eph 4:8-16).
6. The priority of spiritual worship (Luke 22:14-20; John 4:19-26; 1 Cor 11:23-34). The breaking bread is given priority because it is a meeting for collective worship and is observed on the first day of every week.
7. The authority of the Word of God alone without creedal statements, organizational rules or councils, even though we do believe in the accuracy of the historic creedal statements (Acts 20:32; 2 Tim 3:16,17).
8. A spiritual, not organizational link between assemblies. The word "autonomy" fails to fully express the truth of God's rule. An assembly is only answerable to God, yet interdependent with other assemblies (Acts 11:22-26; 14:23-28).
9. The silence of women in audible prayer, testimony or assembly teaching and preaching (1 Cor 14:34; 1 Tim 2:8-15). Teaching a Sunday School class does not violate this principle. It is not an assembly meeting.
10. No financial support from unbelievers (3 John 5-8; Prov 15:8;21:27).
11. The dependence on the presidency of the Holy Spirit in salvation and service (John 1:12-13; 3:5-8; 1 Cor 2:2-5; 2:13-16; 2 Cor 4:3-6).
12. Internal discipline and excommunication when Scripture demands it (1Cor 5:9-13; 1 Tim 1:18-20).

Many of the practices outlined above are unique to assemblies. Some companies conform in part to some of these truths, but all of these are identifying marks of a New Testament assembly.

## TRADITIONS

Paul uses the word "tradition" in a good sense in 1 Corinthians 11:1-2; 2 Thess 2:13-15, and 3:6, 7. A tradition is a handover, truth handed down either by spoken word or written record. When Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "I have received of the Lord that which I delivered unto you..." (11:23), he was handing down truth—delivering a godly tradition. Timothy was commanded to "commit to faithful men" the truth he had learned from Paul, and they in turn would be able "to teach others also" (2 Tim 2:2). This is godly tradition.

The Traditions of the elders of Israel made up a vast amount of material. There are 32 pages in the Mishna on how to cleanse vessels. *Traditions have a very bad sense in the Gospels and in the experience of Saul of Tarsus.* Matt 15:3, "Ye trespass the commandment because of your traditions." Mark 7:8, "Ye leave the commandments of God and hold fast traditions." Gal 1:4, "Being more exceeding jealous for the traditions of the fathers."

## TRADITIONS OF ASSEMBLIES?

It is sometimes claimed that many assembly practices are merely traditions. People who say this describe a tradition as a practice that has no scriptural authority. It may once have had meaning, but is no longer relevant. We need to ask, What are these traditions that should be done away? Asking this question, I have been given the following list of "traditions", so called.

## THE NAME OF "GOSPEL HALL"

Isn't it a second name? Hall is not a formal name. It is a word like room, garage, home, barn or shed. The Carnegie Music Hall is a place for people to gather to hear music. The Gospel hall is a place for people to gather to hear the Gospel. Fellowship is not based on what Christians call their building. No Christian belongs to a Gospel hall, the building belongs to an assembly.

## TIME OF THE BREAKING OF BREAD

The principle of first things teaches us to give worship the first place. "On the first day of the week, the disciples came together to break bread" (Acts 20:7) is an important pattern. It agrees with NT teaching (Mark 16:9; John 20:19, 26, 1 Cor 16:1-2). The command of the Lord is "As often as ye eat this bread and drink this cup ye do proclaim the Lord's death" (1 Cor 11:26) and NT assemblies did this every first day of the week.

## THE CIRCLE AT THE BREAKING OF BREAD

It is not the shape of the circle that is important, but "in the midst" is God's authority model, not a pyramid, but a circle with the Lord in the midst.

Two great principles are found in Hebrews 10:25 and 2 Thess 2:1. The word for "gathering around" that is only found in these two verses is equivalent to the word epicentre. Just as we will be gathered around Him in the air, so we have the great privilege of gathering around Him in an assembly now. He is the true Gathering Centre, the epicentre. We can express this great spiritual principle in a visible way when we gather around Him (Heb 13:13).

### SPIRIT'S LEADING

The Spirit's leading does not begin after we arrive at a meeting. The characteristic of the "sons of God" is that they are led by the Spirit of God (Rom 8:14). Phil 3:3 teaches that it is by the Spirit that we worship. An assembly is indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and He must preside in it (1 Cor 3:16).

### THE BACK SEAT

1 Cor 14:16 describes the "seat of the unlearned". Some have taught that the meaning of "unlearned" is merely that the man was unlearned in the tongues that were being spoken. If this were its meaning, then this man did not have any distinction from the rest of the company because six times in the previous verses it says that no one understood the tongue, not even the man who spoke it. Verses 23-25 explain that the unlearned man was ignorant about the Lord being present in the midst of the assembly. The whole church was already gathered together when he came in (v 23), so he was not part of the assembly and unknown to the saints as to whether he was unsaved or only unlearned. The remainder of the description of this hypothetical case points out that he was unlearned, but was a true believer who was able to worship God. This is a clear case of a saved man who was not in the fellowship of an assembly and he occupied the "seat of the unlearned". This practice is not merely a tradition of assemblies. It has behind it the truth of the within and without of an assembly. We freely admit that it would be better to call it "the seat of the observer" rather than "the back seat".

### HEADSHIP

Our worship is spiritual John 4:24), without mechanical device or aid, yet the Lord left us five physical elements, water (baptism), bread, cup, long hair and a covered head. (Gen 1:26-28; Heb 2:1-10; Eph 1:22-23; 1 Cor 11:1-16).

Far from being a minor, non-essential teaching, the truth of the Headship of the Lord Jesus is one of the greatest truths in the Bible. What an honour and privilege that an assembly can show to God, angels and the world a truth that will yet be displayed to a wondering universe.

The passage on headship (1 Cor 11:2-16) teaches two coverings, the long hair as well as the veiled head of sisters and the short hair and uncovered head of the man. These are not meaningless traditions, but are spiritually significant practices of godly assemblies.

## THE CONDUCTING OF ASSEMBLY MEETINGS

All seven meetings of an assembly: the Lord's supper, and the meetings for prayer; gospel, ministry, report, elders and discipline are from the New Testament. Shepherding ministry, teaching and Gospel preaching are the three functions of the three gifts that were given by the risen Lord for the maintenance of testimony (Eph 4:9-16). As in such passages as 1 Corinthians 14, we still pray, sing and speak from God's Word when we meet together.

### APPROPRIATE DRESS

"A meeting" is a meeting with the Lord, and there should be reverence and awe at His Presence. A casual attitude is expressed by casual dress. A meeting is not casual. The usual excuse given is, "If my heart is right, outward appearance does not matter," but only God can see our hearts, others see the outward appearance. There cannot be testimony, unless all that expresses it can be seen and appreciated by the eyes of others.

### MUSIC

The New Testament is silent on music, but has much to say about singing. The singing of I Corinthians 14: 16 was accompanied by two things, "the spirit and the understanding". This would have been the place to give teaching about a musical instrument, but none is mentioned. In Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16, two other elements accompany singing. They are "melody" in the Ephesian passage, and "grace in the heart" in Colossians. Even the word "melody" which is akin to "orchestration" does not help people who want to use musical instruments in an assembly. This "melody" is made in the heart and is the result of being filled with the Spirit.

Even though the ministry of music occupies a very large place in many denominations that profess to be guided alone by Scripture, there is not a line of instruction in the NT about a musical ministry. Hebrews 9:1-22 teaches that along with the animal sacrifices, altars, vestments, incense, gold, silver and priceless gems, the silver trumpets, ram's horns, timbrels and harps of the OT were only shadows that were fulfilled in the coming of Christ and then withdrew.

An assembly is a temple of God, but it is not the outer court where the musical instruments were employed. It is the inner sanctuary (*naos*, not *hieron*) where no musical instrument was ever admitted even in Old Testament days.

O Lord we know it matters not how sweet the song may be,  
No heart but of the Spirit taught, makes melody to Thee.

Many kinds of musical instruments are connected to Babylon (Rev 18:22).

## DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN THE BODY AND AN ASSEMBLY

Almost without question, no subject that can be taught about the church and the churches is more relevant to today's needs than this distinction between the church which is His body and a local church of God on earth. The "church on earth" may convey to many minds all the believers in the world at any given time, but this is not language that is used in the NT. We need to wonder why? We find it convenient to speak of "the early church" or "the church in the 20th century". We even hear Christians speaking about "the church in South America" or some such geographical identification. Why does not the NT use language like this at all? Because there are only two aspects of the church in the mind of God:

- 1) The great spiritual body of Christ;
- 2) A local expression of it, a church of God.

To be a member of the body of Christ does not automatically mean that I form part of an assembly. This is a major issue in assembly practice.

1 Corinthians 11:32 gives us a comprehensive view of the entire world in which a believer or an assembly bears testimony for God. It is made up of Jew, Gentile and church of God. In God's reckoning, there is nothing else. Scripture does not add assemblies together and give them a name to identify them as a joint testimony. God's testimony on earth is an assembly of Christians and although there are many such assemblies, they each stand on their own golden base and the Lord in the midst is their link to each other (Rev 2:1), and is the Centre of each gathering (Matt 18:20).

There are as many as forty differences in the New Testament between the church which is the body of Christ (often called, the universal church) and a local assembly. This is a most important truth for at least two reasons:

1. No one should be in an assembly who is not in the body, although, sadly, this sometimes happens.
2. There are many genuine believers who form a part of the body of Christ who do not form part of a local assembly.

There was a believer like this in 1 Corinthians 14:23-25. Verse 23 clearly says, "the whole church" had come together. At this meeting no one was sick or travelling away from the assembly. All were present, when a man came in who was unknown to them. He might be an unbeliever, or he might be a true believer who had not been received into the fellowship of an assembly.

As he looked on, from the seat of the unlearned (v 16), he saw the divine order and recognized the truth which he had never learned before "God is in

you of a truth" (v 25). Falling down on his face he "worshipped God", so he was a true believer who up to that time was not in an assembly. He was unlearned about the presence of God as the "Gathering Centre" of an assembly. It is a hypothetical case, so we can't trace his next steps, but we have no doubt that such a man who was "without" would very soon be "within" the assembly (1 Cor 5:12-13).

### ASSEMBLY RECEPTION

In many minds, "receiving to an assembly" has behind it the thought of being received to the Lord's supper, to break bread with the believers. Actually, reception is never to the supper, but always to an assembly of which the supper is one of the greatest privileges (Rom 16:1-2).

It has been widely taught that "if a person is truly saved and is clean in life and doctrine, he should be received to an assembly." This statement sounds good at a casual reading, but for at least two reasons it does not fit the teaching of the New Testament.

The first reason is that reception is not a one-way street. If it is reception to the fellowship of an assembly, then not only is the individual received by the assembly, but the person receives the assembly and the truth it believes and practises. This is the plain truth from the pattern in Acts 2:42. A true believer may not, through wrong teaching or a lack of teaching, understand the truth of the presence of the Lord as the Gathering Centre. The man in 1 Corinthians 14:23-25 had not learned this precious truth. He was saved, but he was unlearned. When he had learned that the Lord was truly in the midst of His people, he was then fit for reception.

The second problem with the statement that all true believers should be received is, "If they are strangers to us, how do we know they are true believers, clean in life and sound in doctrine?" In the earliest days of power and discernment, even when apostles were present, there was care taken as to who was received (Acts 9:26-30). How much more do we need to exercise care in a day of mixture and confusion?

The Lord Jesus taught, "By their fruits ye shall know them" (Matt 7:20). Some have taught that this verse only applies to the false prophets that are mentioned in verse 15. The false prophets are identified by their fruits (v 16), but then the Lord's teaching widens to embrace "every tree" (vv 17,19). Many passages in the NT warn against mere words when there are not works to prove the words are true.

All we are teaching here is that time and caution can save from mistakes that may cause serious harm to an assembly. Open reception does not work. There have been times when reception of people who practised tongues and other such disruptive activities have destroyed an assembly.

## THE SEAT OF THE UNLEARNED

We need to be careful that we ever act toward other believers in a humble and gracious, Christ-like spirit. We earnestly desire to have whole-hearted fellowship with all who truly love His name and we should ever so live and teach that we draw true believers to the Lord Jesus and to an assembly that gathers in His name. However, it is not fellowship to invite a believer who does not understand the principles of assembly gathering to break bread. Which of us has the right to bring a stranger, unknown to our fellow believers, into the assembly for an occasional visit? Is not this a violation of the very fellowship we express in the "one body" (1 Cor 10:16)? The "fellowship" is "steadfast" (Acts 2:42) and cannot be either occasional or casual. The table is not ours. Who has the right to invite anyone to the Lord's table but the Lord Himself? There is a place of learning, "the seat of the unlearned" (1 Cor 14:16).

A review of what is written on page 12 is necessary here. Some have looked back through the first 15 verses of 1 Corinthians 14 and said that "unlearned" means to not understand the tongues that were being spoken. If this is its meaning, then everyone in the assembly, including those who were speaking in tongues were "unlearned", and we cannot make the "unlearned" distinct from them all. In six places in these 15 verses, we are told that nobody understood the tongue (v 2,3,4,6,9,11) and even the speaker did not know what he said (v 14). However, in verses 23 to 25, we learn that "the seat of the unlearned" was occupied by a man who was not part of "the whole church". In the hypothetical illustration that Paul is using, it turned out that he was saved, was able to worship God and learned that "God is in you of a truth".

The distinction between those who are in the fellowship of an assembly and those who are not does not rest in 1 Corinthians 14:16. There are numerous parts of the New Testament, particularly Acts 2 and the two "church epistles", from which we learn that an assembly is an entity, made up of a number of believers in a given place who are baptized and have been received into the assembly and continue in it steadfastly (Acts 2:41-42; 1 Cor 1:1-3; 3:616; 5:12-13; 10:15-22; 14:15-25; 1 Tim 2:8-15; 3:1-16).

The reason that the "seat of the unlearned" is more evident at a breaking of bread meeting is that it is the only meeting at which all partake of physical elements that are emblems of the fellowship and oneness of an assembly. Fellowship is a spiritual truth, but at the Lord's supper, it is given visible expression by the one cup and loaf and even by the circle around the table, and the separate seats for those who are not in the assembly (1 Cor 10:15-17).

This carefulness in reception is one of the greatest preservatives of an assembly as "a holy temple of the living God" (1 Cor 3:16-17; 2 Cor 6:16). The religious world calls this practice, "closed communion", but we believe it is a vital necessity in maintaining testimony to the name of the Lord Jesus.

SOME DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN THE BODY AND AN ASSEMBLY	THE BODY	AN ASSEMBLY
1. It is the body of Christ	1 Cor 12:13.	It is body-like in character
2. It is the church, His body	Eph 1:22-23.	1 Cor 12:28
3. It is the bride of Christ	Rev 19:7; 21:1-5	It is the church of God
4. It is a great spiritual house	1 Pet 2:5.	1 Cor 1:2.
5. It is the one flock	John 10:16.	It is a chaste virgin
6. It is a holy temple	Eph 2:21.	2 Cor 11:2
7. It is the habitation of God	Eph 2:22.	It is house of God
8. It is spiritual body	Eph 1:22	1 Tim 3:15
9. Entered at conversion	1 Cor 12:13.	It is a little flock
10. It is a precious pearl	Matt 13:45	Acts 20:28
11. Christ is Head over it	Eph 1:22	It is a temple of God
12. Every believer is in it	1 Cor 12:13.	1 Cor 3:16.
13. It was a plan of God in eternity		It is a building of God
14. A hidden mystery	Eph 3:2-10.	1 Cor 3:9
15. Maintained in it by God's power	Jude 1, 24.	It is local company
16. Everyone a member of Christ	Eph 5:30.	1 Cor 1:1-3.
17. It is the purpose of this age	Acts 15:14.	Entered by reception
18. Being in it is positional	Col 1:18	Acts 9:26.-28
19. Neither male nor female	Gal 3:28	It is a golden lampstand
20. Impossible to be separated from it	Rom 8:38-39.	Rev 2:1
		Christ is Lord over it
		1 Cor 1:9.
		Believers not all in it
		1 Cor 14:25
		It is a planting by men in time
		An open epistle
		2 Cor 3:3.
		Maintained by behaviour
		1 Cor 5:11
		Members of each other
		Rom 12:5
		It is the testimony for this age
		Matt 18:20.
		Being in it is practical
		1 Tim 3:15
		Women silent in the church
		1 Cor 12:34
		In discipline, put away from it
		1 Cor 5:11-13

21. Nothing false can ever enter it	Wolves will enter it
Matt 16:18.	Acts 20:29.
22. It has perfect unity	It has schisms
John 17:21	1 Cor 3:3.
23. Never in one place at a given time	Regularly all together
Acts 1:1-2,	1 Cor 14:23.
24. Lord Jesus is the great Builder	Men are the builders
Matt 16:18	1 Cor 3:8,9.
25. Satan cannot prevail against it	Satan can corrupt it
Matt 16:18	2 Cor 11:1-3.
26. It will be presented faultless	Removed in judgment
Eph 5:26.	Rev 2:5.
27. Will reign with Christ forever	Will cease at the coming
Rev 5:10.	Rev 2:25.

These distinctions give adequate proof that an assembly is an entity, a particular number of believers who meet regularly together as a New Testament church. Being in it is distinct from being in the body. An assembly is not a vague coming together of believers wherever they happen to meet. It is a distinct called-out company.

These believers are known to one another and are known by the shepherds of the little flock who have been given a special charge to oversee, guard, protect and feed them (Acts 20:28).

In Paul's words to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20, there are at least four proofs of the great value God places on an assembly.

1. The Price of its Purchase: it has been "purchased with His own blood".
2. The Proof of its Ownership: "the church of God"; His name given to it.
3. The Preciousness of its members: "a little flock", under the protection of the One Shepherd and the under shepherds.
4. The Provision for its needs: "oversight"—"feeding".

Reception to an assembly is the result of mutual desire for fellowship on the part of the assembly and the individual. When a believer from another assembly comes to visit or to reside, he is received by letter (Acts 18:2, 18, 26; Rom 16:1-3, 2 Cor 3:1). As in all reception, the receiving back of a restored believer is the act of the entire assembly (2 Cor 2:5-11). The reception of teachers and their teaching requires very special care (Acts 18:27, 1 Thess 5:12). Elders are accountable for all that is taught in an assembly.

It is impossible to find all this teaching about reception to an assembly in the New Testament and then claim that any believer may come and go as he wishes. "They continued steadfastly...in the fellowship" (Acts 2:42).

## THE SEVEN MEETINGS OF AN ASSEMBLY

In New Testament days, when travel was so difficult and many who gathered in assemblies were poor, and even slaves, and there was no Sunday off privilege, such as we enjoy today, it is very likely that an assembly met to remember the Lord, had teaching, prayer and gospel preaching in one long session (Acts 20:6-12), but this does not contradict the distinctive character of the seven meetings of the assembly that are described in this outline.

### The Lord's Supper, 1 Cor 11:23-34.

In its dignity—"The Supper of the Lord" 1 Cor 11:20.

In its simplicity—"The breaking of bread" Acts 20:7.

The Institution of the supper, Luke 22:15-20.

The Injunction for the supper, 1 Cor 11:24.

The Intention of the supper, 1 Cor 11:26.

The Inclusion in the supper, 1 Cor 11:18-22.

The Investigation for the supper, 1 Cor 11:28.

The Lord's supper is the meeting that expresses more fully than any other the basis for assembly fellowship and it gives character to every other meeting of an assembly. It is an expression of collective worship and because worship is toward God while all other service is primarily toward others, it has priority and primacy in assembly meetings. The great privilege of worship is to be our eternal occupation. The Lord's supper (1 Cor 11:20), on the Lord's Day (Rev 1:10), to proclaim the Lord's death is the nearest place to Heaven we can ever be on earth. Its weekly celebration never becomes tedious or common place. To gather with God's people to give God thanks for His Son and to remember the sacrifice that purchased eternal redemption for us is one of the greatest blessing bestowed on us. "This do in remembrance of Me" is a command that we love to keep.

### The Assembly Prayer Meeting, Acts 2:42, Acts 12:5.

Personal prayers are a vital part of a believer's life, rightly called, "Our native breath", but collective prayer is a separate privilege and is the "continuing steadfastly in prayer" (Acts 2:42) of an assembly.

W. E. Vine once wrote a paper that described seven ways to destroy a prayer meeting. They were: 1) don't come; 2) if you do, don't pray; 3) use the time to plan your weekly activities; 4) pray very long; 5) pray for nothing specifically; 6) pray without heart; 7) pray without the Holy Spirit. "I will therefore that men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands..." (1 Tim 2:8).

### **The Ministry Meeting, 1 Cor 14:1-5; 29-40.**

The "ministry meeting" includes a Bible conversational reading or any meeting for the edification, exhortation and comfort of an assembly (1 Cor 14:3). The practice of assemblies has always been to make a clear distinction between a "ministry" and a "Gospel" meeting. When this distinction is blurred, believers may recognize the teaching that is for them, but how can unsaved people distinguish what is for them? In fact, where there is no clear cut difference, unsaved people attempt to apply Christian principles to themselves. There are many places where sinners are never called sinners; the need of the new birth is confused with the thought of a "rededication". This method may look good in campaign reports, but is barren in eternal results.

The librarian of a large seminary put together a list of assembly writings. Many of the early writers did not append their names to their papers. The librarian used various criteria to determine if the writer was an assembly writer. One of these was, Did he distinguish between a meeting for ministry and other kinds of meetings? We still have ministry meetings. The Lord Jesus gave as part of the Great Commission that we should teach them "to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you" (Matt 28:20). Paul did not fail to "teach all the counsel of God" (Acts 20:27).

### **The Gospel Meeting, Acts 13:42-49, 1 Thess 1:8.**

We are at a loss to be able to explain why the heralding of the Gospel as a public declaration has fallen into such serious neglect. When new methods are promoted for Christian witness, the heralding of the Gospel is missing from the agenda. All believers should be personal witnesses, and this one on one evangelism is a vital part of Gospel witness. However, all believers are not gifted evangelists and a public declaration of the Gospel by an evangelist is very different from personal witness. We are very sure that this neglect of Gospel preaching by a herald has been caused by ignorance of New Testament teaching, but it is also a symptom of shallow belief about a spiritual awakening that leads to "repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:21). Easy-believism has substituted for the convicting and saving power of the Holy Spirit.

There are at least five words used in the NT for preaching. The general word for evangelism covers every method by which the truths of the Gospel are communicated. The word that is used by Paul in 1 Corinthians 2:1 could be paraphrased, "a man with a message". The content of the message is expressed by the word for preach (*kerugma*) that is used in 1 Corinthians 1:23.

The word, *kerusso*, in 1 Corinthians 1:21 is used 60 times in the NT. A careful reading of this word in every case will show that it is only used for the declaration by a herald to a company of people. When Philip went up into the

chariot of the Eunuch, he "preached unto him Jesus" (Acts 8:35). Philip was an evangelist, but he is not exercising his public gift, so the word for preach is not *kerusso*, but *evangelidzo*, because it was a personal witness, not a public declaration. Those who tell us that one on one witness is the method for today, not public preaching, are ignorant of this distinction. We believe in "the work of an evangelist" (2 Tim 4:5) which is a gifted, public declaration of "the Gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20:24). There is awakening and quickening power in "the preached word" (1 Thess 1:6).

We need to ask ourselves why it is that when assemblies change their practices, two of the meetings that decline in importance or are totally neglected are the breaking of bread and the Gospel meeting. Some have gone so far as to say that the preaching of the Gospel has lost its attraction and the Lord's supper had become tedious and boring to them. It has been claimed that "meditation" is a 19th century practice that is not relevant to our day. We have always thought that meditation "day and night" in the truths of God's Word was a holy practice from Scripture. The Lord Jesus is the perfect Pattern (Psalm 1:2), and it is not an outmoded practice of 19th century "brethren".

A love for Gospel preaching is a true test of our spiritual condition. "The preaching of the cross is to those who perish foolishness (tasteless), but unto us who are saved, it is the power of God" (1 Cor 1:18). If the remembrance of the Lord is boring, and meditation on Him is outmoded, and the preaching of the cross is tasteless to us, let us examine our hearts and confess to God that we are far away from Him. The answer is not to invent new methods and new machinery, but restoration in our souls.

#### The Report Meeting, Acts 14:26-28.

The report meeting is often called a missionary meeting and the mission field is usually thought of as a foreign land, but reports from home workers are equally scriptural. The pattern for such a meeting is beautiful: "When they were come and had gathered the church together, they rehearsed all that God had done with them, and how He had opened the door of faith unto the Gentiles" (Acts 14:27).

We may need to rethink our distinction between the evangelist and the missionary. They are not two different gifts, they are the same. The evangelist may preach in his home land or a foreign land, but he is exercising his evangelistic gift in whatever place God has called him to labour. It is not fair nor scriptural to commend an ungifted brother to a foreign land, if he is not judged to be gifted enough to preach at home. Godliness, grace and experience should be given priority, but gift is also a necessity.

#### The Elders Meeting, Acts 20:17-38.

A body of elders should meet regularly for prayer and discussion about the

spiritual needs of the saints. It should not be merely a business session where matters that are related to the building and property are decided.

There are at least four descriptive names for this body of brethren. It is their spiritual maturity that is in view when they are called "elders" (1 Tim 5:17). In their work, they are "overseers" (Acts 20:28) who literally "look over" or "look after" the spiritual needs of the assembly where they have this responsibility. They are not voted in or out, but are raised up by the Holy Spirit.

In their care of the little flock, elders are pastors (shepherds) (Eph 4:11; 1 Pet 5:2). A pastor is never one man over a church who exercises all the gifts. Such a system is common in Christendom and has been adopted by some professing assemblies, but it is a denial of four great New Testament truths:

1. The pre-eminence of the Lord Jesus,
2. The priesthood of all believers,
3. The multiplicity of gifts,
4. The rule of a body of elders without veto power over their decisions.

This is not an indictment against the personal godliness of individuals who take a position as the one pastor of a local church, but it is a condemnation of the system which the Lord says He hates (Rev 2:15).

Elders are deacons in service (1 Tim 3:8-13). This word applies to their spiritual ministry as well as to their practical work. All elders are deacons, but a man or woman may well be a highly valued deacon, yet not be an elder (Rom 16:1-2). There is a recognized body of elders, but all who have spiritual fitness may function as deacons when they are given assembly work to do.

#### **The Discipline Meeting, 1 Cor 5:3-5.**

The language of this passage suggests a distinct, separate meeting for discipline that is quarantined to the assembly and not known beyond its limits. This is very difficult when discipline is appended to another meeting.

The meeting that is described in Matthew 18:20 may also have been a meeting for discipline. This fact does not diminish the value of that verse, but it does say that even at the smallest assembly meeting, the presence of the Lord in the midst is promised. The distinction between Matthew 18:20 and 1 Corinthians 5:4 is that the former was a meeting to make a decision about the offending brother, but the latter was the calling together of the whole church to carry out discipline. The assembly only carried out what Heaven had determined should be done (Matt 18:18).

Discipline may be internal, or it may require excommunication. The reasons for excommunication are given in Matt 18:15-20; 1 Cor 5:1-13; 1 Tim 1:20. It is always in view of recovery and that others may fear (1 Tim 5:20).

## ASSEMBLY RESPONSIBILITIES

We have come now to the responsibility that God has given to us to maintain testimony and to preserve it in accordance with God's Word. We are assured by the Lord Jesus that testimony will continue until He comes (Matt 28:20). There is evidence for this in the fact that from the days of Adam, God has never been without testimony in the world. It has always been a remnant testimony and has often been very weak and small. The Lord told the religious leaders of Israel, "Behold the kingdom of God is in the midst of you" (Luke 17:21: JND), and he was referring to Himself and the little band of Galilean fishermen who gathered around Him. There will be testimony to the end. May God keep us faithful to Himself and His Word that we may form a part of that testimony until He comes!

We want to examine assembly responsibility as it relates to an assembly's testimony. What does God expect of us as a church of God on this earth?

### RESPONSIBILITIES OF AN ASSEMBLY

#### **To be a collective testimony for God in the world**

We need to understand the importance of a collective testimony. There are beloved saints who individually bear an excellent testimony to the saving and keeping power of the Lord Jesus, who have not learned the importance that God has placed on a collective testimony to the peerless name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

An assembly is called a "church of God" (1 Cor 1:2) because it belongs to Him and is His testimony in the world. The weakness and smallness of such a testimony may be very discouraging to us, but God has "chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things that are mighty" (1 Cor 1:27). This is a principle of the testimony for God in the world through the ages. Human smallness and weakness are means by which God may display His power. However, this does not give us grounds for complacency, but for concern.

In 1 Timothy 3: 15, an assembly is a "church of the living God" because it has been called out of the world. It is a "house of God" because we have been brought into it. In this epistle of stewardship, it is fitting that an assembly is viewed as a "house of God" with divine order and rule.

The "house" has beauty that adorns it. The Lord Himself is in the midst as "God manifest in flesh" (v 16). David's words beautifully express our privilege, "One thing have I desired of the Lord...that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life to behold the beauty of the Lord" (Psa 27:4). What a privilege to behold His beauty!

The house not only has beauty that adorns it, it has behaviour that becomes it (1 Tim 3:15). Rather than being a negative statement that warns against wrong behaviour, Paul is describing correct behaviour which involves the lifting up of holy, priestly hands in supplication, worship and blessing (2:8). The house also has brethren who care for it (3:1-13) and it has belief that characterizes it (3:16).

In the same context, we are told that an assembly is a "pillar and ground of the truth" (v 15). The "ground of the truth" is the thought of a bulwark that stands as a courageous defence of the faith against every onslaught of men and Satan. The "pillar" suggests four principles of testimony. An assembly is a pillar to hold up the light of testimony in a dark world. As a pillar is used to hold up a structure, so an assembly holds up divine truth. There are pillars that are used to honour a name. An assembly honours the blessed name of the Lord Jesus Christ. A pillar may be used to commemorate a great victory, some great deed of men. An assembly commemorates the great deed of Calvary, we proclaim the death of our Lord until He comes (1 Cor 11:27).

One of the major themes of Paul's first letter to Timothy, which is a church epistle, is the stewardship of the Gospel (1:11-17). An assembly must ever be faithful in its declaration of the Gospel. "God our Saviour...will have all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (2:4). He has given to an assembly a solemn charge to "preach the Word" (2 Tim 4:2).

These are responsibilities of an assembly.

### **RESPONSIBILITIES IN AN ASSEMBLY.**

To give some order to assembly responsibilities, we want to look at them under nine sub-headings.

#### **1. TO PRESERVE UNITY**

The first great theme of 1 Corinthians, which is the unique epistle of the gathering together of an assembly, is unity. It emphasises the Lordship of Christ in the gathering. Note the expression "The same Lord" (1:2; 12:5). "In the Lord" is used ten times and, particularly in this epistle, its context is to acknowledge the Lordship of Christ in the gathering.

- a) The name of the Lord and our appreciation of it (1:1-2; 5:4).
- b) The coming of the Lord and our expectation of it (1:7; 15:51-58).
- c) The table of the Lord and our separation unto it (10:16-21).
- d) The supper of the Lord and our commemoration of it (11:20-27).
- e) The death of the Lord and our proclamation of it (11:27).
- f) The commandment of the Lord and our obedience to it (14:37).
- g) The work of the Lord and our occupation in it until He comes (15:58).

The oneness of an assembly is positional truth. It has been purchased by the precious blood of Christ which is the basis of the unity (10:16). However, we have a solemn responsibility to maintain unity in practice. Compromise with error or evil is not "endeavouring to keep the unity" (Eph 4:3). It is only in the measure that we acknowledge the Lordship of Christ in the gathering and are obedient to "the commandment of the Lord" (14:37) that true unity can be preserved. This unity will be seen as we manifest "Philadelphia", the love of brothers, and show our love and care for one another in prayer and kind deeds. The schisms in Corinth were caused by envy (3:4-8).

It is in 2 Corinthians 6:14-18 that the language of unity is found. Fellowship is a common sharing of privileges and responsibilities. Communion is the joy of oneness. Concord is a sounding together, the opposite of discord. Agreement is to have one mind and one heart as we unitedly submit to Christ as Lord.

## 2. TO MAINTAIN PURITY

The second great truth related to the assembly at Corinth is moral righteousness and purity (3:16, 17; 5:1-13). An assembly is the residence of the Spirit of God. Because of His presence, it is a holy "temple of God". It can be marred by false teaching or moral impurity, but for anyone who mars the temple there is a solemn recompense, "that man will God mar".

The man in chapter 5, marred the assembly by his sin. He was put away from the assembly as a wicked man and the assembly was thus cleansed of the defilement. It was for an act of sin, an act of fornication, not for a wrong attitude that the man was excommunicated (5:2,3). The attitude of the assembly and of the man were wrong, but the cleansing from defilement was necessary because the assembly is holy. This is a far larger need than the offender's punishment or recovery. But he was recovered (2 Cor 2:6-11).

## 3. TO GUARD SIMPLICITY

Simplicity and godly sincerity are wonderful preservatives (1 Cor 3:18-23; 2 Cor 1:12). The "church of God" belongs to the God who searches hearts. When I come into His house (the assembly), I am confessing that I recognize that He is jealous of the hearts of His own (2 Cor 11:2) and a divided heart or duplicity in my motives must be judged in the light of His presence (10:22).

There should be no activity in an assembly that is merely a display of flesh. We have enough of the flesh in our ways to mar an assembly, but flesh and fleshly activity must be judged, exposed and rejected. This also means that any mere display of human talent is wrong. There is no room in an assembly for entertainment. The attraction to an assembly must be because of "the beauty of the Lord", not fleshly attraction. We confess that in all we do there is sin—"iniquity of the holy things" that needs to be confessed and judged.

#### **4. TO SHOULDER RESPONSIBILITY**

There is a balance in Scripture between privileges enjoyed and responsibilities accepted. "They continued steadfastly...in the fellowship" (Acts 2:42). It is not possible to do this without assuming responsibility and every believer in an assembly shoulders some of it.

The teaching of Romans 12:6-11 is that all are able to serve. Whatever ministry has been given to us, we should give ourselves to it (v 7). Feet, hands, eyes and ears are necessary in service, but first of all it must be heart work. It is no coincidence that Romans 12 begins with a total yielding to the Lord of our bodies (all we are and have) (v 1) and then moves on to our responsibilities to one another (v 4), to the assembly (v 6-11), to the world (v 14-21, the powers that be (13:1-7) and then to our neighbours (13:8-21).

Assembly responsibility is more than what we do in outward service. We add to the assembly's spiritual weight or detract from it according to our spiritual condition. In Revelation 11:1 there is a divine measurement that weighs and measures worshippers. If we come with unexamined hearts or lives we diminish the assembly's worship, weight and power. We wrongly affect our fellow believers as well as bringing chastisement on ourselves (1 Cor 11:27-32). A right spiritual condition can add much fragrance to an assembly's offerings to the Lord .

I have heard it said of a believer, "All he knows to do is to attend meetings." This sounds as if attending meetings was somehow a small matter. It is not. No fellowship can be maintained unless it is a wholehearted oneness and this means whenever a meeting of the church is held, I will be present unless attendance is impossible for me (Heb 10:25). The truth about "not forsaking the assembling of yourselves together" is deeper than meeting attendance, but the exhortation to meet around the Lord and recognize Him as the Gathering Centre cannot be obeyed without attendance at all the meetings of the assembly when it is possible.

#### **5. TO ALLOW SOVEREIGNTY**

An assembly is the residence of the Holy Spirit on earth (1 Cor 3:16) and He must have sovereign control in it. The tendency to human organization has often stifled the operation of the Spirit. It is possible to quench His work by failing to respond to His leading. This leading is not a vague emotion, but rather it is simple obedience to the Word of God. To be "filled with the Spirit" in Ephesians 5:18 corresponds to allowing "the word of Christ" to "dwell richly" in us in Colossians 3:16. The Holy Spirit speaks in the words of Holy Scripture and we must allow His authority to rule in an assembly.

The Spirit raises up overseers and fits them to shepherd, feed and guide. The recognition of His work in the government of an assembly is submission

to the Spirit. He empowers the preaching of the Gospel. There is no substitute for the awakening and convicting power of the Holy Spirit in His preparation of hearts to receive Christ. God by His Spirit still must command the light to shine out of darkness as He did at the beginning (2 Cor 4:6).

To control the function of priesthood is an operation of the Spirit that is unique to assemblies. He guides and sovereignly controls the holy and royal priesthood in supplication and worship. This is a divine arrangement and the order of a meeting where He is allowed to control gives glory and pre-eminence to the Lord Jesus (1 Pet 2:5-11, John 16:14).

## 6. TO PROVIDE LIBERTY

The Holy Spirit uses the gifts of the evangelists, pastors and teachers and controls their activity (Eph 4:8-13; 1 Cor 12:4-11; 14:26-36). He also energizes these gifts as they function under His control for the edification, exhortation and comfort of the saints. An assembly that is obedient to the Word of God allows liberty for the function of gifts. The gifts are never all given to one man who functions as pastor, teacher and preacher. In 1 Corinthians 12:8-10, the expression "to another is given gifts" is used seven times. Gifts are given according to divine choice and do not function because of an official position. We should recognize godliness, grace and gift, but not offices. Official position is not a part of assembly order.

We have much cause to grieve over the lack of gifts and their profitable function. This is the reason for the exhortation, "But covet (desire) earnestly the best gifts" (1 Cor 12:31). This is an earnest desire that God will raise up gifts in the assembly. It is not a personal coveting of gift for myself. If God has given you a gift, be certain that you "Neglect not the gift that is in thee" (1 Tim 4:14). A diligent, holy cultivation of gift is necessary. "Stir into flame the gift of God that is in thee" (2 Tim 1:6 RV). Diligent work is a major part of gift and its function.

When there is liberty for the function of gifts, the 'little flock' will be fed. The wise and faithful steward gives the right portion of food in due season (Luke 12:42). It is tragic when God's people are not fed (Acts 20:28).

## 7. TO DISPLAY AUTHORITY

It is a divine and eternal purpose that the church that is the body of Christ should be an object lesson to heavenly hosts of "the manifold wisdom of God" (Eph 3:10-11). It is also in the divine purpose that an assembly should be a display to men and angels that God has destined His Son to have eternal and universal Headship over all things (1 Cor 11:2-16). The covered heads of sisters in an assembly and their long hair is a foreview of truth that the universe will see in a coming day. God has given Christ to be "Head over all things" (Eph 1:22).

An assembly exalts Him in a world that rejects Him. We have the

privilege of owning in a rebel world, His supreme Headship over all things.

Sisters show submission to the authority of the Lord Jesus by their long hair. They display the great truth of His Headship by their covered heads. The two coverings of 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 are to be practised "when ye are gathered together" (v 16, 18, 20, 33). The key to understanding the coverings is in verse 3, and the spiritual meaning of the coverings is found in verses 4 to 16. There are two coverings as verse 6 so plainly says. The "also" is from the original text and cannot be deleted without doing damage to the meaning. A veil is put on the head (v 6), long hair is a covering around the head (v 15). Even the position of the coverings is distinct.

Many have asked why Paul does not forbid the women to pray and prophesy in 1 Corinthians 11, whereas in 14:34, he distinctly forbids them to speak at all in the church. This problem is best explained by the order of the teaching. The subject in chapter 11 is headship; the subject in chapter 14 is edification. Paul deals with each subject in its own order. Were women taking audible part in Corinth? We don't know, but the degree of disorder that was in the assembly does not make this improbable (11:20-22). When a brother is taking audible part, he functions in priesthood for the assembly and the offerings to God are the offerings of all the assembly, therefore the head coverings of the women are needed.

## **8. TO UPHOLD SPIRITUALITY**

A major theme of 1 Timothy, a church epistle, is personal godliness. An assembly is only as godly and spiritual as those who form it. Paul gives a true test of spirituality in 1 Corinthians 14:37, "If any man among you think himself to be a prophet or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandment (singular) of the Lord." All of the teaching of this church epistle is put under one heading, "the commandment of the Lord" and spirituality is measured by the degree of obedience to it. Genuine spirituality and true love for the Lord Jesus and my fellow believers is proven by obedience to God and His Word (1 John 5:2).

## **9. TO CONTRIBUTE TO LIBERALITY**

Our offerings to the Lord begin with ourselves. The "fellowship of the ministering to the saints" meant that the Macedonian believers "first gave their own selves to the Lord, and unto us by the will of God" (2 Cor 8:4-5). But the great pattern for giving is, "For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor" (v 9). The offering of ourselves, our songs, our substance and our service is our reasonable service (Rom 12:1).

I have never heard assemblies beg for funds. God's order is a voluntary offering on the first day of the week (1 Cor 16:2).

## HISTORY—OUR HERITAGE

**Assembly Testimony: Where did we come from? Where are we?**

"A people without history are a people without character."

This section is a brief history of assemblies as we know them and attempts to answer the questions, Where did we came from? Where are we now? and What of the future? A fuller history is planned, God willing.

### A MOVEMENT OF GOD

Almost two centuries ago, the Holy Spirit moved on the hearts of godly men and women who were a part of denominational systems. Some of them were prominent leaders in church, government and society. This movement was not of men. There is ample evidence that it was of God.

Formal religion had in many cases become little more than a pretence. Many claimed church membership without salvation. Spiritual minds rejected the dead formalism, mere ritualism and a clergy without Christ. They searched the Scriptures, often on their knees, to know what God would have them do. What they discovered was the simplicity of an assembly that gathered to the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. It was a mighty awakening by the Spirit in their hearts.

The movement was far-flung. The same truths were revealed in places as far distant from each other as the south of England, Ireland, Orkney Islands, Br. Guiana, New York City, USA and Rangoon, Burma. One of the most powerful evidences that this was a work of God is that these believers were *unaware of each other*.

As early as 1825–28, such names as Edward Cronin, J. N. Darby, Lord Congleton, J. G. Bellett, Edward Wilson, William Stokes and H. Hutchinson are linked with this movement. The first meeting for the breaking of bread of which we are aware was held in the home of Mr. Hutchinson, 9 Fitzwilliam Square, Dublin. They separated from all ecclesiastical systems and came together in the name of the Lord Jesus, owning the presence and sovereign action of the Holy Spirit in their midst. They were deeply impressed with the truth of Matthew 18:20. Later, A. N. Groves, Wm. Kelly, George Muller, Henry Craik, R. C. Chapman, S. P. Tragelles, C. H. Mackintosh, Sir Robert Anderson and many others took their place as believers in local assemblies.

However, our heritage as assemblies in North America cannot be traced back to Dublin, or Plymouth, nor to the great men whose names are linked with John Nelson Darby Our story has a different origin and is as follows.

## BLESSING IN SCOTLAND

Mr. Ritchie wrote that in Shorts, Scotland, June 21, 1630, "500 people were saved at one meeting. The Gospel was preached by faithful men of the Scottish church."

In the early 19th century Thomas Chalmers and Andrew Thomson were saved after becoming clergymen and from 1800 to 1825 preached with such power that many confirmed church members were awokened and saved.

Murray McCheyne, Wm. Burns, Brownlow North, A. and H. Bonar and many other names are linked with those days of blessing.

On Dec 10, 1846, Duncan Matheson was saved. His description of salvation is very clear, "I saw no one but the Lord Jesus. I wept for my sin that nailed Him to the cross. I knew the calm of a pardoned sinner. I was saved." He figures largely in the history that follows because no man had greater influence on Donald Ross than Duncan Matheson.

Donald Ross was called home from his work as a school teacher to his dying brother's bedside. He returned to his school, fully awakened about his sin and eternity. Shortly afterward, he was saved through John 18:8, "If therefore ye seek me, let these go their way."

## NORTH-EAST COAST MISSION

With its headquarters in the City of Aberdeen, the North-east Coast Mission was formed as an inter-denominational evangelical society. In 1858, at 34 years of age, Donald Ross was appointed as its superintendent. He was without funds or workers, but chose D. Munro, John Gill, John Smith, George Masson, A. Carnie and others to work with him. These fearless and godly men were charged with preaching the Gospel along the Moray Firth and the Aberdeenshire Coast, 500 miles of deeply indented coastline in north-east Scotland with 57 towns and villages.

## 1859 REVIVAL

The '59 Revival began in the town of Kells, Northern Ireland. My grandfather was saved in Kells in 1859 through the preaching of Jeremiah Meneely in a barn. The blessing spread to many parts of the world.

Scotland did not miss out on this time of awakening. At Peterhead, Fraserburgh, Buckie, Lossiemouth, Cullen and Footdee the power of God was so manifest that no fishing boat sailed for many weeks. Thousands of souls were saved. The preaching was plain, pointed and powerful. Many church members were awokened. Multitudes of people were shaken out of their sleep.

*This awakening resulted in great opposition from the unconverted clergy. Not only were young believers not helped, but everything was done to hinder and discourage them.*

## **CONVICTIONS AGAINST INTER-DENOMINATIONALISM**

The N. E. Coast Mission was denominationally funded. When pressure was exerted by the offended clergy, the men who held the purse strings began to withhold funds. Already disappointed by the mixture in this society, in 1870 Mr. Ross severed his connection with the Mission. It meant that he and his fellow workers were without funds.

### **"NORTHERN EVANGELICAL SOCIETY."**

That same year, the evangelists formed the Northern Evangelical Society with freedom to be guided as to where and how long they would conduct meetings. They had no organizational backing, looking to God alone for their support and He did not fail them. They learned much in trusting God alone.

### **INVERURIE**

In 1869, Donald Munro and John Gill had seen blessing in inland towns. Now that the evangelists could move as they were led by God, they returned to preach in places such as Banffshire, Rothes and Boharm. In 1871, amidst much opposition in Inverurie, Old Rayne, Oyne and Insch God worked in mighty power. Among the many converts were 200 young men. The name of at least one of them is well known to us. On April 2, 1871, John Ritchie was saved.

Up to this time, the evangelists sent the new believers back to the denominations to be taught and shepherded by clergy who in many cases were not saved. This problem drove Donald Ross and his companions to their knees and to the Word of God to earnestly seek divine guidance.

### **BAPTISM, ASSEMBLY TRUTH**

On his knees before God, seeking to know how to teach the new converts, Mr. Ross discovered that as a believer he needed to be baptized. His infant sprinkling was not enough. In the River Dee, in April 1871, he humbly obeyed the Lord by being baptized.

At this time, Donald Munro was in Ontario, Canada. When he returned, Mr. Ross confronted him with his need to be baptized, expecting resistance, but Mr. Munro informed him that while reading God's Word in Canada, he had seen the truth of being baptized as a believer. In December of that year, Mr. Ross baptized Mr. Munro.

They then taught the new converts what they had learned and hundreds obeyed the Lord in baptism, which further estranged them from the formal religion of the established churches all around them. Clergymen gave lectures on the "errors" of the Gospel preachers and used the new believers as object lessons of folly. But as in the case of Paul, the persecution fell out rather unto the furtherance of the Gospel.

## THE BREAKING OF BREAD

In Old Rayne, in a carpenter's shop, owned by Sandy Stewart, the evangelists and many new believers met for prayer and the study of God's Word. From Scripture, they learned the need to separate from ecclesiastical systems and to gather simply in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ to break bread on the first day of the week to proclaim the Lord's death. In the carpenter's shop, they met for the first time as an assembly. John Ritchie, who was present, later wrote that they did not know there was another company like them anywhere in the world.

Later Mr. Ross learned of three other small assemblies in Scotland at Aberdeen, New Deer and Peterhead. At that time, Mr. Ross and his brethren had no knowledge of Mr. Darby or any such gatherings elsewhere. From that day, assemblies sprang up all over Scotland and Northern England.

## THE SPREAD OF BLESSING

In Woodville Cemetery in Sommerville, MA, there is a grave marker that bears the inscription, "Is Your Soul Saved?" Beneath it is the name of James Campbell. In November, 1871, at Jarrow-on-Tyne, England, an assembly met without the knowledge of others through the work and exercise of dear James Campbell. He became one of the most faithful Gospel pioneers of Northern Ireland and New England in the U.S.A.

Donald Munro had visited relatives in Ontario in 1871. Meetings were held in Parkhill and Forest and many were saved, among them were three brothers of Mr. Munro. In October, 1872, he came back to Ontario and taught the new believers the truth of baptism and gathering to the Lord's name. In 1872, an assembly was planted at Parkhill, Ontario. The following year, he saw assemblies planted at Forest and Lake Shore. Within the next few years many assemblies were formed in such places as Hamilton, Clyde, Valens, East Toronto and London, Ontario.

In December, 1868, Douglas Russell had come to visit relatives in Galt, Ontario and began to preach the Gospel on the Queen's Square. A saved clergyman invited him to preach in his church building. Many were awakened and saved, but at this time, Mr. Russell did not know assembly truth. He returned in 1873 after having learned baptism and truths of gathering. Over 50 were baptized and an assembly met in the blacksmith's shop at Clyde. Later, assemblies were formed at Valens and Galt. Such names as McBain and Scott, great grandparents of my wife, were among the converts in this area.

## HAMILTON

In 1874, Donald Ross and John Smith rented a room on King Street in Hamilton. Interest and attendance were small. They preached on the street corner each night to invite people to their meeting in the room. One night a

young man of 19 was stirred as he listened to the plain preaching on the corner. He followed the preachers into the building and as he entered was confronted with a sign that read, "Friend, you are travelling to eternity, to an everlasting heaven or an endless hell, Which?" Within a short time, he was saved through John 3:36. The young man was T. D. W. Muir who at the age of nineteen began to preach the Gospel with Mr. Ross at Clyde and Galt. He also preached with Mr. Carnie and D. Munro and with Donald Ross went to Detroit, Michigan to preach Christ in the U.S.A. Through many hardships and with great faithfulness Mr. Muir continued to preach the Gospel on the streets of Detroit and in rented rooms. God worked in salvation and believers were taught baptism and assembly truth. From Detroit, Mr. Muir and other workers preached the Gospel throughout Michigan, seeing souls saved and assemblies planted. This booklet is being written at Jackson, Michigan, an assembly that was planted through the efforts of Mr. Muir along with Thomas Dobbin from N. Ireland and Mr. Tousseau from Ontario.

Similar stories can be told of Mr. John Knox McEwen in the Maritime Provinces of Canada, Mr. John Gill in Boston, Mr. John Smith in Cleveland, Mr. Donald Ross in Chicago, Kansas City and the West Coast of the U.S.A. Other evangelists went west from Ontario to see assemblies planted across the Canadian Prairies and in Vancouver, on the West Coast of Canada.

John Blair came from N. Ireland to the small town of Dunkerton, Iowa. He had a sister there, Mrs. Robert Orr, for whose soul he had a deep concern. Unexpectedly he knocked on her door, announcing that he had come from Ireland to tell her that she must be born again. Meetings in a home at Dunkerton resulted in a number being saved, including Mrs. Orr, and the planting of an assembly. Mr. Blair preached with Oliver Smith in the early days of the gospel at Hitesville and Stout and other Iowa communities where assemblies were planted.

These gospel pioneers, who were mighty labourers for God, are our heritage. Assemblies in North America, as we know them, owe their origins to these men, and many others, who under God fulfilled the commission of the Lord Jesus to preach the Gospel to every creature, to baptize them and to teach them to observe all things that He commanded. These assemblies have no historical link to either the open or exclusive brethren assemblies. Of course, through the years, believers from assemblies in Britain, France and other countries of Europe have immigrated to North America and have been received into these original assemblies that were planted through the labours of the pioneer Gospel preachers.

We find it staggering that assemblies which owe their origin to the labours of these pioneers should ever turn away from the methods that they found to be so fruitful. If anything, the darkness is deeper and the need is greater than

ever. Yet many have given up their regular meeting for the preaching of the Gospel. Series of Gospel meetings are almost unknown in many places. One of the excuses that is used is that there is no point in preaching the Gospel to Christians. Small results and indifference on the part of many with whom we come in contact does not excuse us for lack of effort. Where there is a genuine effort and a humble looking to God for results, God has drawn near and richly blessed the preaching of the Gospel. It can even be said that Christians need to hear the Gospel preached. Nothing so stirs our souls and warms our hearts like the Gospel preached in the power of the Holy Spirit. Men with a deep passion for the souls of the lost is our background and our heritage. It is also the pattern from the Book of Acts and fulfils the great commission of the Lord (Matt 28:16-20; Mark 16:14-20). If we abandon the faithful heralding of the Gospel, we have departed from God's method of saving souls (1 Cor 1:21-24). People are saved who have never heard the message publicly preached, but they are the exception rather than the rule. May we always be able to say, "We preach (*kerusso* - declare to a company) Christ crucified."

Every assembly believer has much cause to thank God for the precious truths of salvation, baptism, separation and gathering in the name of the Lord Jesus that have been entrusted to us from God through His faithful servants. We also should be deeply humbled by our failure, weakness and coldness of heart. Yet, we believe that God will maintain testimony until the church age closes and the rapture takes place. God grant that the writer and each one who reads these words may be found faithful until He comes!

THE END

by

NORMAN CRAWFORD

# ASSEMBLY TRUTH

With  
a brief history  
of some  
Assemblies

# Preface

It was the sin of Adam in Eden that first closed the door on the meeting of God with man. Through Jacob, God promised that "unto Him (Messiah) shall the gathering of the people be" (Gen 49:10). To Israel, God said, "There I will meet with thee and I will commune with Thee from above the mercy-seat" (Exod 25:22). Because it was accepted as atonement for sin, the blood on the mercy-seat typically allowed God to commune with man. The promise was fulfilled when the Shekinah Glory filled the tabernacle and the divine Presence was displayed as the gathering centre of the camp of Israel (Exod 40:34).

When God brought Israel into the promised land, He chose out of their tribes a place to put His name (Deut 5:12). To this place Israel brought their burnt offerings, sacrifices, tithes, heave offerings, vows, firstfruits and freewill offerings. At this place of God's choice, they met before the Lord, worshipped and heard His Word.

There is not any one physical place that God has chosen today out of the world, but we gather to the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ in His name and the promise of God is true in a far deeper sense, "There will I meet with thee and will commune with thee". This book attempts to describe such a meeting with the Lord. Such a meeting place is a New Testament assembly gathered in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.