

The Local Assembly (2)

The Members of the Local Assembly

The People of a Local Assembly

- Paul opens his letter to the local assembly in Philippi by writing “to all the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons” (Philippians 1.1). Every local assembly is populated by believers (saints), some of which are overseers (bishops) and deacons – these are positions of public responsibility.
- Whilst every believer is a member of the *great* assembly – the “body of Christ”, not every believer is a member of the *local* assembly. The condition of membership in the great assembly is faith in Christ. This is a *family* fellowship in which every believer shares the same divine life (1 John 1.1-3).
- However, the members of a *local* assembly are those who have been saved, baptised, and received by a local company of believers. This creates a *doctrinal* fellowship, in the which the members share the same beliefs.
- Thus, there is a difference between the fellowship of **life** (great assembly) and fellowship of **light** (local assembly).

The Principle of Local Assembly Fellowship

- The Greek word for fellowship is *koinōnia*. It describes the act of sharing in the activities or privileges of an intimate association or group. In Scripture, fellowship is the sharing of *spiritual* privileges and responsibilities.
- Local assembly fellowship is therefore not just partaking in the Breaking of Bread. Reception is to the full fellowship of the assembly, with *all* its responsibilities and privileges.
- The local assembly has a clearly defined membership. Paul speaks of the “within” and “without” of assembly fellowship (1 Corinthians 5.12-13). He also speaks of *two kinds* of people that may come into the assembly gatherings – “unbelievers” and those that are “unlearned” (1 Corinthians 14.23).
- “Unlearned” [*idiōtēs*] is a technical term for a *non-member*. The apostles were called *idiōtēs* because they had not been taught in the seminaries of Judaism (Acts 4.13). They had no formal religious education – they were fishermen!
- Thus, in 1 Corinthians 14, the “unlearned” are *believers* (in contrast to “unbelievers”, v.23), but not *formal* members of the assembly fellowship. They needed to appreciate that God was dwelling in their midst!

The Prerequisites of Assembly Fellowship (Reception)

- Assembly fellowship must be closely guarded else “grievous wolves” may enter (Acts 20). There are several scriptural conditions for local assembly fellowship, the basis for which is found in Acts 2. The gospel was preached and believed, individuals were baptised, then “added” (joined) to the company of believers in Jerusalem, that is, the 120 (Acts 1.15).

1. Conversion (Acts 2.41)

- Peter preached the gospel on the day of Pentecost and some 3,000 souls “gladly received his word”, that is, they believed the gospel. Salvation is a condition of local assembly fellowship.
- When Saul of Tarsus came to Jerusalem after his conversion, and sought to join the local assembly in Jerusalem, their first concern was whether he had been genuinely saved. They “believed not that he was a disciple”. It took the personal testimony of Barnabas to convince them otherwise (cf. Acts 9.26-27).

2. Confession (Acts 2.41)

- Baptism by immersion. The word *baptize* means to be immersed in water; *submerged* and caused to *emerge*.
- This is not sprinkling. If a believer has been sprinkled before conversion, or baptised by immersion after a false conversion, they would need to be re-baptised.

3. Creed (Acts 2.42)

- Local assembly fellowship is based on the Apostles’ doctrine because the assembly is “the pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Timothy 3.15). Paul describes false doctrine as “leaven” suggesting it will quickly infect the whole.
- The apostles’ doctrine consisted of the verbal teaching of the twelve apostles. In its widest sense it refers to the full body of teaching preserved in the NT, all of which was written by apostles or close associates of apostles. Jude calls this “the faith... once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3).
- More specifically, in the Acts, the apostles clearly taught and emphasised specific fundamental truth in relation to the person and work of Christ – His deity and perfect humanity, sin-atonement, death, bodily resurrection and second coming. They also emphasised the person and work of the Holy Spirit, baptism, inspiration of Scripture and the great doctrine of justification by faith alone in Christ alone, not by works.

- Each believer in the Jerusalem local assembly persevered diligently in, and adhered closely to, Bible doctrine (Acts 2.42). This presupposes they were *taught* the truth, *grasped* the truth, and *cherished* the truth.
- Scripture mentions some doctrinal errors which would prevent local assembly fellowship. These include *salvation by works* (Galatians 5.1-9); denial of the *incarnation* of the Lord Jesus (1 John 4.3); denial of the Lord Jesus as the true and promised *Messiah* of the OT (1 John 2.22); denial of the *eternal sonship* and *deity* of the Lord Jesus (1 John 2.23).
- There is also Hymenaeus and Philetus who denied a *future physical resurrection* (2 Timothy 2.17-18).
- There are other doctrinal matters which may preclude fellowship in a local assembly, but as Scripture does not stipulate beyond the above, this would be a matter of local autonomy.
- How much does a believer need to know of the apostles' doctrine to come into the fellowship? Very little. Attitude is more important than knowledge. Unlearned believers must display a willingness and readiness to be taught.

4. Character (1 Corinthians 3.16)

- The local assembly is “temple of God” in character and therefore holy. Any person in local assembly fellowship must be of good moral character. The sexually immoral man of 1 Corinthians 5 was put out of fellowship (5.13).
- Paul goes on to describe other similar moral sins (v.11). Any “called a brother” (professing believer) and *characterised* by sexual immorality, covetousness (material greed, gambling), idolatry, railing (abusive, insulting, violent language), drunkenness or extortion (fraud, robbery) cannot be part of a local assembly fellowship.

The Practicalities of Reception

- The modern liberal practice of receiving anyone who self-identifies as a believer to break bread because he claims to be part of the Body of Christ is unscriptural. Romans 15.7 must never be used to justify this practice. It is an exhortation to believers *already* in fellowship to welcome one another with warmth and kindness, in a spirit of toleration.
- Caution is required in reception. If a person arrives unannounced without any commendation, it is very difficult to ascertain required details about *creed* and *character* on the door. Such a person should be asked to observe.
- The scriptural practice to avoid this is a *letter of commendation* (or *personal* commendation, Acts 9.26-27). Phebe was not known to the believers in Rome, but Paul wrote her a letter to ‘stand with her’ (Romans 16.1-2). Such letters are beneficial because they assure the person commended, and those receiving them, of the confidence of the saints. They also safeguard against one under discipline coming amongst the people of God.
- If an unknown believer visits an assembly without a letter of commendation, they have no right to expect to be received. According to the Lord Jesus, personal witness is not enough. “*If I bear witness of myself, my witness is not true.*” (John 5.31). It is in the mouth of *two or three* witnesses every matter is established.
- Assembly fellowship is *mutual*. The assembly receives the individual, and the individual the assembly (doctrine).
- Assembly fellowship is *corporate*. The *assembly* receives and the *assembly* puts away. An assembly should therefore be given time to speak with a person the oversight has recommended (by interview) for permanent fellowship.
- Assembly fellowship is not *casual* or *convenient* – it is a matter of *conviction* of assembly principles and practices.