

# The Local Assembly (3)

## The Meetings of the Local Assembly

### The Priority of Gathering

- From the earliest days of the church, the priority of believers was to gather (Acts 2.42). These were not gatherings for *social* reasons, but for a *spiritual* purpose. Be careful not to overemphasise the social at cost to the spiritual.
- The verb “continued steadfastly” is very expressive, literally meaning ‘strong towards’ or “give oneself to” (Acts 6.4). The thoughts of *ongoing devotion*, *persistence* and *perseverance* are foremost. They did not busy themselves in other things! Let us not become so ‘strong’ on peripheral things, that we neglect these major matters.
- Hebrews sounds the warning of neglecting the gatherings of the saints, “*not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is...*” (10.25). This may have been due to persecution or indifference.
- Primarily this was a warning to those in danger of going back to Judaism. Those who deliberately and persistently abandon the gatherings of the saints, were in danger of abandoning the Lord Himself!

### The People at the Gatherings

- *Every* believer in fellowship should be present at *every* meeting. There are some exceptions for ill-health, old-age and full-time workers who may be in other places preaching the word of God (Acts 13.3-4). It is also good for children to develop the habit of being present whenever possible.
- *Every* assembly gathering is for *every* believer. There is **no** scriptural precedent for gatherings that divide believers like ladies’ meetings. Every believer is welcome to every meeting, no-one is excluded.

### The Purpose of our Gatherings

- John 20 describes the earliest gathering of saints after the resurrection of Christ. It was a foretaste of the church age. “*Then the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled [synagō] for fear of the Jews, came Jesus and stood in the midst, and saith unto them, Peace be unto you.*”
- The Acts of the Apostles uses the Greek word *synagō* to denote **seven** different reasons for which the saints gathered. The word means ‘to assemble or collect in one place for a definite purpose’, literally ‘to bring together’.

#### 1. The Prayer Meeting (Acts 4.31)

- Paul gives the prayer meeting *priority* in importance (1 Timothy 2.1). Prayer is of vital importance to the life of the local church. Indeed, the local assembly (house of God) cannot function *properly* or *effectively* without prayer.
- Every believer in fellowship takes part in the assembly prayer meeting. It is a corporate, collective exercise. “*They [plural] lifted up their voice [singular] to God with one accord,*” (Acts 4.24).

#### 2. The Bible Teaching Meeting (Acts 11.26)

- Paul and Barnabas assembled with the Christians in Antioch for a whole year, “teaching” (instructing) the saints. It is essential the shepherds of a local assembly plan to ensure the flock receives a varied, balanced, and consecutive diet from the whole word of God (Acts 20.27). The assembly is the true Bible school.
- The teaching meeting can take the form of formal didactic discourse or a discussion-based forum like a Bible Reading. The word “preaching” in Acts 20 (v.9) can mean to *instruct*, but also to engage in *conversation* or *discussion*.

#### 3. The Bible Reading Meeting (Acts 15.30)

- In early days of the church, believers did not have individual copies of the Scriptures, and many could not read or write. Apostolic letters were copied by scribes, but this was a long and laborious process. Hence, the public reading of the word of God was essential (see 1 Timothy 4.13).
- When the word of God was read, the bearer of the letter likely gave some sense of its meaning at the same time. The precedent was set long ago in the days of Nehemiah (8.8): “*So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading.*”

#### 4. The Gospel Meeting (Acts 13.44)

- In Antioch in Pisidia, Paul preached in the Jewish synagogue concerning the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The following week, “almost the whole city” congregated to hear the gospel.
- The synagogue could not have accommodated such a large crowd (mainly Gentiles); hence it was likely in front of the synagogue or in the market square. It was a public place.

- Gospel preaching is vital to assembly testimony. The *pillars* of assembly function and witness (Acts 2.42), stand firm on the *foundation* of the preaching of the gospel (Acts 2.41).
- Gatherings like children's meetings are obvious extensions of the gospel meeting focused on a particular audience.

### 5. The Breaking of Bread Meeting (Acts 20.7)

- The terms "Lord's Supper" and "Breaking of Bread" describe the same event with a different emphasis. The word "Lord" is an adjective meaning 'belonging to the Lord'. Christ is therefore the *author* and *subject* of the Supper – it is in *honour* of Him and takes *character* from Him. "Breaking of bread" describes the act of participation.
- Paul says, "as often as ye" (1 Corinthians 11.26) suggesting something *frequent* and *regular*. The NT pattern is the "first day of the week" (Acts 20.7) – the day of the resurrection of Christ and birthday of the church (Pentecost).
- The Breaking of Bread is always associated with a local assembly whether *Jerusalem* (Acts 2), *Troas* (Acts 20) or *Corinth* (1 Corinthians 11). It is the collective act of an established assembly, and therefore cannot be practiced haphazardly by a group of individuals who happen, for example, to be together on a holiday cruise!
- The simple aim of the Supper is to "remember" the Lord Jesus by breaking the bread and drinking the cup, emblems of His death. The whole gathering is marked by simplicity of remembrance of Him – every contribution, prayer, reading or hymn should be focussed on Christ.

### 6. The Missionary Report Meeting (Acts 14.27)

- After Paul and Barnabas had completed their first missionary journey, they returned to Antioch (their commending assembly) and "*rehearsed (announced) all that God had done...*".

### 7. The Elders' Meeting (Acts 15.6)

- This is the *only* gathering which does not involve *every* believer in the local assembly fellowship.
- Acts 15 describes the gathering together of the apostle and elders in the assembly at Jerusalem to discuss a vital matter of doctrine which had the potential to permanently destroy and undermine the very foundations of the gospel.
- When difficult matters arise, elders gather to *discuss* and *determine* the best course of action (cf. Acts 20.17-38).

### 8. The Discipline Meeting (1 Corinthians 5.4)

- This is a gathering of the saints to discipline and formally announce the placing of an individual outside the fellowship of the assembly. The whole assembly receives to fellowship, and therefore the whole assembly disciplines.

### The Principle of our Gathering

- The great principle of local assembly gathering is found in Matthew 18.20. This builds on the OT principle when God established a single centre of gathering (at Jerusalem) to the name of the LORD God (Deuteronomy 12.5).
- In the NT, God has established many centres of gathering to the name of the Lord Jesus. These individuals were gathered [*passive verb*] by the Spirit of God. Men cannot create an assembly.
- The gathering is to the "name" of the Lord Jesus because He would not be present physically.
- Gathering "unto [*eis*] the name" suggests *three* things:
  - **Authority.** Christ is the sole authority *for* our gathering and *in* our gatherings.
  - **Association.** We represent Christ and therefore gather in consistency with His character, mind and will.
  - **Attraction.** The magnetism of the Person of Christ draws us together.
- There is no gathering to any *other* name. Some churches are named after *countries* (England), or *persons* (Lutheran), or *practices* (Baptist), or a form of *church government* (presbyterian). We should gather to Christ alone.
- Where these conditions are met, Christ has promised to be spiritually present, "*There am I in the midst of them.*"

### Participation in the Gatherings

- Males participate in the gatherings *audibly* and *verbally*, subject to the Spirit's leading. Sisters are silent.
- There is also a sense in which *every* believer participates in the assembly gatherings. We all participate by our:
  - **Attendance.** A believer's active decision to be present is an encouragement and help to all who gather.
  - **Appearance.** Sisters are adorned in *modest* apparel (as are the males). Dress should be appropriate and respectful for appearing in the presence of the Lord for it conveys a message and belies an attitude.
  - Clothes with loud worldly logos or slogans are hardly appropriate for a spiritual, separated company.
  - **Attitude.** We participate by our demeanour – showing interest and paying attention to what is said. Do we regard it as important? Even how we sit can show reverence before God.