

Participation in Assembly Gatherings – Some Guidelines and Principles

There are **eight** scriptural assembly gatherings:

1. The Prayer Meeting (Acts 4.31)
2. The Bible Teaching Meeting (Acts 11.26)
3. The Gospel Meeting (Acts 13.44) – an extension of which is Sunday School, and other works focussed on young people
4. The Missionary Report Meeting (Acts 14.27)
5. The Elders' Meeting (Acts 15.6)
6. The Bible Reading Meeting (Acts 15.30)
7. The Breaking of Bread (Acts 20.7)
8. The Discipline Meeting (1 Corinthians 5.4)

General Principles – Non-Verbal Participation

Attendance

- Every saint has the privilege of participating in every assembly gathering – simply by attending the meeting. Attendance *is* participation. Some saints always want to be seen to be doing; what is more important is a determined attitude to be *present* at the gathering – not necessarily *prominent* at the gathering.
- From the earliest days of the church, the priority of believers was to gather (Acts 2.42). The verb “continued stedfastly” expresses ongoing devotion, persistence and perseverance.
- Hebrews sounds the warning of neglecting the gatherings of the saints (10.25). Primarily this was a warning to those in danger of going back to Judaism. Those who deliberately and persistently abandoned the gatherings of the saints, were in danger of abandoning the Lord Himself!

Attitude

- We participate in assembly gatherings by our demeanour – showing interest and paying attention. Is the word of God important to us? Do we really believe what we are preaching? Others are watching our attitude.
- What is your attention span? What about facial expressions? Even how we sit can show reverence before God.
- Being on time for the gatherings is part of a believer's attitude. You would not be late for a job interview!

Appearance

- Believers must be adorned in modest apparel (1 Timothy 2.9). Dress should be appropriate and respectful for appearing in the presence of the Lord because it conveys a message and belies an attitude.
- Clothes with loud worldly logos or slogans are hardly appropriate for a spiritual, separated company.

General Principles – Verbal Participation

Expectation

- Males have the responsibility to lead audibly in public prayer, subject to the Spirit's leading (1 Timothy 2.8). Sisters join in the spiritual exercise of praying, but they do so silently (1 Corinthians 14.34).
- Brother, it is as serious for you to sit silent as it is for a sister to pray audibly.
- No one contribution, audible or silent, is more important than any other. All are a sweet savour to the Lord and contribute to the spiritual atmosphere of the meeting.
- The males are praying on behalf of **all**; therefore, they should express the desires of the assembled company (not just themselves personally), and use the language of inclusivity, i.e. “we” not “I”.
- In Corinth, believers came to the meetings ready to participate (1 Corinthians 14.26). One brother had a “psalm” (a song or prayer of praise), another a “doctrine” (teaching). Still others who were prophets had a “revelation” from God. But in every case, all was to be done “unto edifying” – to build up and advance the saints spiritually.
- Deuteronomy 16.16-17 illustrates the point, “Three times in a year shall all thy males appear before the Lord thy God in the place which he shall choose... and they shall not appear before the Lord **empty**: Every man shall give as he is able, according to the blessing of the Lord thy God which he hath given thee.”

Expression

- We must be careful, scriptural and reverent in our language. Avoid using worldly slogans or slang such as “it blows my mind” which originated in the 1960s in reference to psychedelic drugs.
- When referring to the person of Christ, or the work of Calvary it is always best to use Scriptural language for the sake of accuracy. For example, the Father did not come from heaven, and neither did He die on the cross.

Exercise

- You need gift to teach or to preach but you don’t need gift to participate in the prayer meeting – you need exercise. Sometimes, it may not be possible to audibly contribute to an assembly gathering because the time is short, or there are many brethren to take part. Participation is not a competitive sport, but we should always have an exercise. Often, this exercise is borne out of a heart and mind preparation before the meeting begins.
- To allow for the exercise of others, audible contributions should be specific and succinct.

Exclamation

- To say “Amen” at the end of a prayer is the expected response of the assembled company – it is a collective expression of affirmation (1 Corinthians 14.16). The use of “Amen” in gatherings was common from the days of Moses throughout the OT period until Nehemiah (8.6) and was used in Jewish synagogue worship.
- In 155AD, Justin Martyr reported that on the Lord’s Day, when thanks had been given for the bread and cup at the Lord’s supper, “all the people present express their assent by saying Amen”. About 200 years later again, Jerome wrote that in the church at Rome “the Amen resounded loudly, like spiritual thunder”.

Guidelines About Some Specific Gatherings

The Breaking of Bread

- Every assembly gathering involves worship, but the Breaking of Bread is particularly worship focussed. The Lord Jesus said, “This do in remembrance of **me**,” (Luke 22.19). Thus, our focus is on Him.
- Worship is the honour and adoration which are rendered to God, by reason of what He is in Himself. It can be as brief as a word (e.g. Thomas, John 20.28) or as broad as a lifetime (Romans 12.1).
- The Breaking of Bread is therefore not a prayer meeting (to make requests), a hymn-sing (because brethren have no appreciation of Christ to offer), or a gospel meeting (preaching to any unlearned who may be in attendance).
- In this meeting it would not be appropriate to pray that the Lord would save souls in the locality, nor to give a practical (rather than devotional) word of ministry. Keep everything Christ centred not me-centred.
- Some saints can be concerned about their contribution ‘fitting the theme’ of the meeting. But the theme of the meeting is Christ. If your contribution is about Him, it fits the theme!
- Just like the “firstfruits” (Deuteronomy 26.2) our meditations should be the best of what we have gleaned about Christ before coming to the gathering (Psalm 45.1).
- There is no Scripture or tradition to dictate who gives thanks for the emblems, or that the same person gives thanks for both. However, if there are visitors present and you are not sure who should be taking the emblems, it is best left to an overseer.
- In a unique way, the Breaking of Bread is a demonstration of our fellowship with God and one another.
- 1 Corinthians 11.27-29 states that before we partake of the emblems we must “examine” (test) ourselves. We should not be taking part of the emblems with unconfessed sin in our lives or disagreements and divisions with other believers damaging our fellowship and unity.
- If this is the case, we are taking the emblems “unworthily” (in the wrong condition). To put it another way, we are treating the emblems and the Person they represent with dishonour and indifference by pretending we are holy in life and in harmony with each other.

The Bible Reading (and Ministry Meetings)

- When chosen subjects or passages are known beforehand, to get the most out of the study, each saint should read and meditate on the passages before coming. These are corporate Bible studies.
- Those brethren who are contributing to the Reading should have studied the passage before coming. Use word study aids (such as Vine’s Expository Dictionary) and reliable commentaries by assembly writers – like William MacDonald’s Believer’s Bible Commentary or any material from <https://www.stempublishing.com/>.
- In the interests of order, a brother normally leads the Bible Reading. His is the primary responsibility to read and analyse the passage, leading the company through each verse and explaining its teaching.
- The whole purpose of a Bible Reading is to encourage a wide contribution of thought from a variety of brethren. Never be afraid to ask questions or clarify meaning. It is often what the sisters are thinking anyway!

- In ministry meetings, seek to encourage the speaker by concentrating, smiling, nodding or taking notes. Rolling your eyes, smirking, grimacing or clock-watching is largely unhelpful. In this case make it a priority to speak to the brother after the meeting and express your grievance – he won't mind!
- Always follow the passage closely and be prepared to turn to other Scriptures. Be like the Bereans who "eagerly received the message, examining the scriptures carefully every day to see if these things were so," (Acts 17.11).

The Gospel Meeting

- The best way to contribute to a gospel meeting is in an attitude of prayer. The saints should be praying before, during and after the meeting – seeking the Lord's help and blessing in salvation.
- Saints can also contribute to the spiritual atmosphere of the gospel meeting by being quiet and dignified. We do not want to be the cause of snatching away the seed that has been sown (Matthew 13.19).
- As far as the preaching is concerned, we preach Christ and Him crucified. Failure to preach the cross is failure to preach the gospel. The preaching must focus on man's ruin, God's remedy and man's responsibility.
- The gospel meeting, including work amongst children (an extension of gospel activity), is not for the purpose of entertainment (though a preacher should be engaging!) but for the purpose of solemnly preaching Christ.

The Prayer Meeting

- The assembly prayer meeting is essential, not optional (1 Timothy 2.1).
- It is a corporate and collective exercise. Acts 4.24, "They [plural] lifted up their voice [singular] to God with one accord." Prayer is a symphony, with all the saints making one common sound (Matthew 18.19).
- Public, corporate prayer should follow the pattern of addressing God the Father, in the name of the Lord Jesus, through the agency of the Holy Spirit (John 15.16; Ephesians 3.14; 5.20).
- We approach God in all the acceptability of the person of Christ. To pray in the name of the Lord Jesus means to pray in consistency with His mind and character. We should not try and dictate to God in prayer.
- Not all have moral right to lead God's people in prayer (1 Timothy 2.8). To do so we must be able to lift up "holy hands" (selfward), having no unconfessed sin in our lives. We must also be able to do so "without wrath" (resentment towards other saints) and "without doubting" that God is able to hear and answer our prayers.
- There are certain types of prayers to be avoided:
 - **Information** prayer. This involves announcing information to the saints in prayer, rather than speaking to a God who knows everything. It is better to give notice to the saints before the meeting begins!
 - **International** prayer. This involves praying around the world (twice) and back. It is a privilege to pray for anyone, anywhere, but local matters should take priority. Who else is praying for your neighbour?
 - **Imprecise** prayer. These are prayers that are vague and general. "To make prayer of any value, there should be definite objects for which to plead. My brethren, we often ramble in our prayers after this, that, and the other, and we get nothing because in each we do not really desire anything." Our prayers should be specific and spiritual (cf. Ephesians 3.16-19; Colossians 4.3; 2 Thessalonians 1.11-12).
 - **Innuendo** prayer. This is the lowest form of carnality. It involves praying horizontally about or to another saint about some perceived correction that is needed. Try speaking directly to the individual concerned.
 - **Inappropriate** prayer. This kind of prayer may involve the exposition of scripture or be far too long. It is the heathen that think they will be "heard for their much speaking" (Matthew 6.7).

We close with some wise words from the beloved CH Spurgeon:

- *"Never appear to be closing and then start off again for another five minutes. When friends make up their minds that you are about to conclude, they cannot with a jerk proceed again in a devout spirit. I have known men tantalise us with the hope that they were drawing to a close, and then take a fresh lease two or three times. This is most unwise and unpleasant."*
- *"True prayer is measured by weight, and not by length. A single groan before God may have more fulness of prayer in it than a fine oration of great length."*

Note. Some of these notes do not have Scriptures to support them, in which case they are general guidelines borne out of many years of assembly experience.