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The New Testament Church—Its Meeting(s)

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Acts 2:42, 46 And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ... 46 And day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart,

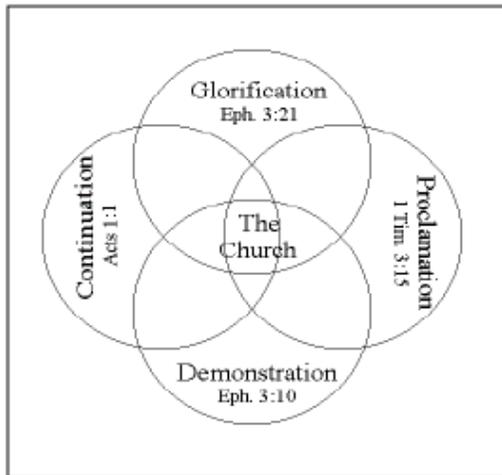
Acts 20:7 And on the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul began talking to them, intending to depart the next day, and he prolonged his message until midnight.

1 Corinthians 11:18 For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that divisions exist among you; and in part, I believe it.

1 Corinthians 14:26-40 What is the outcome then, brethren? When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification. 27 If anyone speaks in a tongue, it should be by two or at the most three, and each in turn, and let one interpret; 28 but if there is no interpreter, let him keep silent in the church; and let him speak to himself and to God. 29 And let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgment. 30 But if a revelation is made to another who is seated, let the first keep silent. 31 For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all may be exhorted; 32 and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets; 33 for God is not a God of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints. 34 Let the women keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but let them subject themselves, just as the Law also says. 35 And if they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in church. 36 Was it from you that the word of God first went forth? Or has it come to you only? 37 If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord's commandment. 38 But if anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized. 39 Therefore, my brethren, desire earnestly to prophesy, and do not forbid to speak in tongues. 40 But let all things be done properly and in an orderly manner.

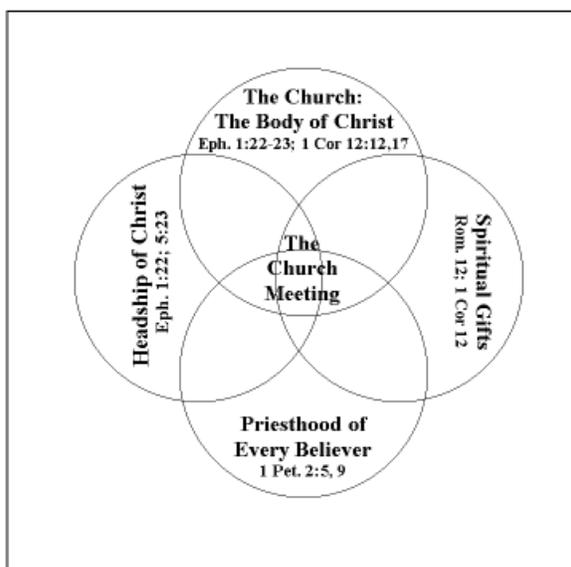
Introduction

As we began this series on the New Testament church we emphasized the importance of the church in God's program. If I may present these principles visually, I think perhaps it will help to emphasize the fact that the New Testament church is the focal point of God's program, for it is in the church that God's purposes converge. We might represent this fact by this illustration:



If we are correct in understanding the church in this way, then it should be clear that the doctrine of the church is of no mean significance, indeed, it is of paramount importance because God's purposes in the world today are inseparably intertwined with the principles and practices of the church. This is ground already covered, but it is worthy of repeated emphasis, for the church today is considered irrelevant and impotent by far too many Christians.

In a similar way it would appear to me that we might say that the meeting of the church is as essential and inseparable from God's principles for the church as the church is from God's program for the world. Let me represent it graphically in this way:



Here we see that the point at which the principles of the New Testament church converge is more than anything else, the meeting of the church. Because of this it is our intention to devote this lesson to the subject, “The New Testament Church—Its Meetings(s).”

The ‘Church Meeting’ and Church Meetings

As we begin we must carefully distinguish between what I am going to call the ‘church meeting’ and ‘church meetings.’ The expression ‘the meeting of the church’ refers to the weekly assembling of the church for the purpose of teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread (or you might prefer ‘communion’) and prayer. Immediately after the birth of the church at Pentecost in Acts chapter two Luke describes the activities to which the new church devoted itself: “And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42).

Now we know that in those initial days of the church, these things were done daily (Acts 2:46), but we also realize that this was not practical for them to continue, any more than we are able to do so today. Consequently, the settled and permanent practice of the church was to meet on the first day of the week to continue in these functions of teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayer. Such seems to be the combined inference of (read Acts 20:1) Acts 20:7-12, 1 Corinthians 11:17ff., and 14:26ff. We assume, therefore, that the ‘meeting of the church’ was the meeting on the first day of every week, to which all Christians who were a part of that church came for teaching, for a remembrance of the Lord in communion, for fellowship and prayer.

I have said generally that the meeting of the church was for the purposes of teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer. When we look at the various passages which describe the meeting of the church in greater detail (cf. 1 Cor. 11:17ff; 14:26ff), we find that there was a great variety in the kinds of participation and activity in which the saints engaged in the church meeting. We know that there was singing (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16), prayer (Acts 2:42; 1 Tim. 2:1-2, 8), teaching (Acts 2:42; 20:7), discipline (Matt. 18:17), the reading of Scripture (1 Cor. 14:26; 1 Tim. 4:13), and perhaps the taking of a collection (cf. Acts 2:42, 45; 1 Cor. 16:1-4). In the early days of the church there was also the exercise of the sign gifts of tongues, interpretation, and prophecy (1 Cor. 14:26-28, 29).

In addition to the regular ‘meeting of the church’ were other meetings conducted by the church. For example, in Acts 12:5, 12ff., the church met to fervently pray for Peter who had been arrested by Herod. We know that Paul taught daily in the school of Tyrannus at Ephesus for nearly two years (Acts 19:9-10). These and many other meetings were no doubt held by the church, but these varied with time, place and circumstances, and were not regularly, consistently or uniformly carried out by all the churches.

You will understand, then, that when I speak of the ‘meeting of the church’ I am not

implying that this is the only meeting which a church can legitimately conduct. Special prayer meetings, home Bible studies, missionary conferences, and special meetings are completely within biblical principles. These meetings can meet with regularity and not violate biblical principle. But these meetings are not mandatory, they are not of equal importance as the ‘meeting of the church.’

Why Can't We Separate These Activities Into Separate Meetings?

Now I am certain that I have already raised a question in your mind. It could be stated something like this: “If all these activities took place in the meeting of the church, what is wrong with having several meetings which include these same functions?” Some churches have prayer meetings, teaching and preaching meetings, singing, Scripture, and so on. And what church doesn't take up the offering? Why must all these things be done at the same meeting? This is a very significant question and well worth the effort of answering.

Biblical Reasons for One Church Meeting

To begin with, let me cite several biblical reasons why a diversity of church meetings is wrong.

(1) The Scriptures teach that every man has the right to participate in the meeting of the church in a variety of ways. When the elements of the church meeting are divided into various meetings, there is almost always no opportunity for every man to participate. For example, although there may be a teaching or preaching service, is any man free to teach then and there? If he is not, then where can he address the whole body for their profit? Now I realize that at the traditional prayer meeting all can pray, but this is almost never the case with sharing a song, a favorite portion of Scripture, or a personal word of testimony. Every man should be free at some time, and I would assert one time, to exercise his priesthood and his spiritual gifts verbally and publicly.

(2) When the various elements of the meeting of the church are divided into several meetings, often there is undue emphasis or value placed upon one as opposed to others. I find, for example, that there are some who feel that the Sunday morning exposition of the Scriptures is all they want or desire, so they do not feel the need to come to the Lord's Supper on Sunday evenings. The emphasis of the New Testament is balanced, so far as I can detect, in the elements of teaching, fellowship, communion, and prayer. Division of these functions almost always promotes imbalance.

(3) Another very serious problem which is created by the division of the meeting of the church into several meetings is that it creates confusion as to when the New Testament principles specifically related to the meeting of

the church are to apply. For example, we are told in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 that women are to keep silence in the church meeting, and not even to ask questions. If the elements of the church meeting are divided among several meetings, does this mean that women cannot ask a question in any of these meetings? If so, in which meetings can she, and in which can she not? What is the basis for the inconsistency? These questions all arise out of a diversity of meetings in place of one meeting.

Practical Reasons for One Church Meeting

Besides being biblical, New Testament practice and teaching is practical. There are a number of very practical reasons for having one meeting of the church.

(1) There are too many meetings and not enough time. In the case of many churches there are just too many meetings and not enough time. Very often in order to be considered spiritual by those in our church we must give inadequate attention to our families. Our society is far too complex, time demands too great, to have a continual series of meetings each week, every week. Sundays are no day for rest; they are days of wrestling and rustling the kids to and from church. We take so much time meeting with the saints, we have no time for the lost.

(2) There is too much travel and too little fuel. To put the matter quite candidly, there is just too much inefficiency with continual meetings in the church. Not only is too much time spent in travel, but also too much gasoline—and it should be clear that this resource will someday be depleted. And this is not to mention the energy which is consumed in heating, cooling, and lighting the church building.

(3) As a result of time and schedule conflicts every family has to make choices which omit some important aspect of church activity. Because it is impossible for every family to attend every church meeting of the week, they must choose some and omit others. Even though they know that the meeting they miss is important, whether it be a prayer meeting, a communion service, or a teaching session, they simply cannot attend all. So, to whatever extent they do not attend every service, they are short-changed.

(4) Just as you cannot dissect a living organism without destroying life, neither can you dissect the meeting of the church without losing some of its vitality. There is something about the combination of elements in the meeting of the church that is missing when each of these elements is isolated to themselves in different meetings. When all of the elements of the church meeting are combined there is a variety, a sense of expectation, a vitality which makes one look forward to coming again. One writer has put into words what it is that we lack in our multiplicity of meetings, when he says,

One cannot help but feel that some of this expression is missing in many churches today and that to some extent Cullmann deserves attention when he asserts that “the services

of worship in the Protestant churches of our own era are very much poorer, not only in respect of the free working of the Spirit, but also in respect of what is liturgical and especially in respect of what is aimed at in the gatherings of the community.”¹¹

I saw a magazine article entitled, “When the Molds Get Moldy” the other day, and I couldn’t help but chuckle when the writer bemoaned the fact that we can almost set our watches by the order of service. Such was not the kind of meeting which electrified the early saints and turned the world upside-down. The various elements of the meeting of the church are decidedly interrelated and cannot be successfully separated. Worship does not happen in a vacuum, or upon command. It is a response to God, His attributes, His faithfulness, His lovingkindness, His working in our lives. When we teach the Scriptures at one time and worship at another we are performing a kind of abortion on the Word of God in my estimation, for just when we have been elevated and inspired by the teaching of the Word of God, just when we have been reminded of His character, and kindness, and goodness, we are told to stand for the benediction. This is the time for prayers of praise, for hymns of praise, for partaking gratefully of the elements at communion which symbolize His work on our behalf. You cannot effectively separate these various elements of the church meeting.

The Meeting of the Church: The Focal Point of NT Church Principles

You will recall that at the outset of this message I began by telling you that just as the church is central to the outworking of God’s program for mankind, so also the meeting of the church is the focal point of the New Testament principles pertaining to the church. Let me reiterate the absolute necessity of the meeting of the church if we are to carry out New Testament principles as we should.

(1) The principle of spiritual gifts. Take the principle that every Christian has been given a spiritual gift (or gifts) for the benefit of the whole body (1 Cor. 7). The meeting of the church gives an opportunity for men to discover and to develop what might be called the vocal gifts in a way that few other meetings allow. Surely there are other avenues of discovering and developing spiritual gifts, but the church meeting is a vital one. Indeed, in many churches of the New Testament church, it may have been the only opportunity for public expression, for there were perhaps no other church meetings.

(2) The headship of Jesus Christ. Second, let’s take the principle of the Headship of Christ over the church. How is it practically manifested through the church? What greater and more obvious way than to come together as a church and look to Him to lead men to teach, to exhort, to share a song or a portion of Scripture as they are divinely led. This does not mean that they have not prepared during the week, but there has been no careful and meticulous coordination of the variety of participations in the meeting. Because there is no one visible leader who is directing every detail of the meeting, it becomes evident that our Lord Himself presides over the meeting through

His Spirit.

The headship of Jesus Christ over His church is visibly apparent by the fact that the men take the leadership in the meeting of the church (1 Corinthians 11:3). This is why Paul instructs the men to lead in prayer and in the teaching when the church is gathered for worship, and why the women are to learn quietly (1 Timothy 2:8-15). This is also why men serve as elders, and not women.¹²

(3) The priesthood of every believer. Now what greater opportunity to demonstrate the priesthood of every believer than in the meeting of the church. Men may exercise their priesthood by verbally praising God and by proclaiming His Word, and by making intercession for men. Women, though not audibly, may pray, offer up the sacrifice of praise, intercede for others, and participate in the remembrance of our Lord's death. Here, indeed, is a corporate exercise of the priesthood of every believer.

The priesthood of every believer is demonstrated in the passing of the elements during communion, and in the prayer offered for the offering. Since the priesthood of every believer removes the Old Testament distinction between laity and clergy, leading in communion and in the offering is the privilege and responsibility of every man.

(4) The church as the body of Christ. At the meeting of the church, the saints gather as the body of Christ. Each member comes in dependence upon the rest of the body. Each member comes to be strengthened and encouraged and edified by the other members of the body. Each is reminded of the unity of the body when partaking of the one loaf (1 Cor. 10:17). Each is reminded of their interdependence in the body of Christ when every member contributes in some form of ministry.

So you see that the principles of the New Testament church beautifully converge and in one way or another find their culmination in the meeting of the church. In this weekly meeting of the local church the saints gather corporately for teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayer. To put it in another way, Godward, they meet for worship; inwardly, they meet for edification; outwardly, they gather to proclaim the glory of His grace. What a privilege has been given to us to gather in this way every week.

May I once again stress the need for balance in the various elements of the meeting of the church. There are some churches which might better be called, "Apostles Doctrine Church," others, "Fellowship Church," still others "Communion Church." But all of these elements should be found in proper balance in every church. That is our desire for our church.

The Meeting of the Church

Now, having said what I have, and you know there is much more that could have been said here, let me describe briefly what we intend to do in the meeting of our church.

First of all, we intend to provide a balance in teaching, fellowship, remembrance of our Lord, and prayer. We consider every one of these items essential. We are going to endeavor to provide a proper balance by having one meeting of the church each Sunday morning from 9 a.m. to approximately 11:30 or 11:45. Since systematic teaching is vital to the growth and maturity of the church, the first portion of the meeting will be devoted to teaching. I am going to begin a series on the book of Acts. While I (or another brother) teach the adults, the children will be studying from the same text (in most cases) on their own level of interest and ability. After the teaching session there will be time for questions (by the men—1 Cor. 14:35) and answers. After this I suspect that we will introduce visitors and then break for coffee and conversation for about 20 or 25 minutes. Then we will begin the worship segment of the meeting and our school age children will join us for a time of singing (including some children's songs). We will have a time set aside for any man to share from the Scriptures. We will also have a time devoted to worship and the remembrance of our Lord in communion. Finally we will have a time set apart for prayer and praise. During the meeting, appropriate songs and hymns and choruses will be encouraged. It is our desire that in so conducting the meeting of the church, our Lord may be praised, the saints edified, and the unsaved convicted and converted.

11 Robert L. Saucy, *The Church in God's Program* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), p. 190, quoting Oscar Cullmann, *Early Christian Worship*, p. 26.

12 This is a point that is often debated. Some would hold that men alone can serve as elders, but that women may serve as deacons (or deaconesses). It is my personal understanding that it is men alone who are to hold both offices. The point here, however, is that by men taking the leadership in the church, they reflect Christ's headship over the church.