

WHY ASSEMBLE? No. 1

We are asking too much of ourselves if we propose an entirely new look at assemblies of those in Christ, for that is impossible. However, let me propose a restudy that may lead to some fresh thoughts on the subject which is so confirmed in traditional misdirection.

Why do we assemble? In my youth I often heard the one presiding at the serving of the bread and fruit of the vine explain, “We have gathered here today upon the first day of the week to ‘take communion’ as we are commanded.” Even though we may seldom hear such compounded misunderstanding expressed today, the underlying imprint still remains. Just last Sunday, I heard “take communion” used three times.

Where is that text that commands assemblies? Where is the text that binds assemblies on the first day of the week and each first day? Where is that instruction to serve the Lord’s Supper every Sunday? Where do we get the absurd idea that one can ‘take’ communion? OK, I am trampling on that which is considered holy, but don’t jump on your horse and ride off in all directions at one time!

Haven’t I heard of Hebrews 10:25 where it says, “Forsake not the assembling on the first day of the week!”? Not exactly! Use later versions for fresher language, but we will read from the King James Version: *“Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering, (for he is faithful that promised;) and let us consider one another to provoke unto love and good works: not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more as you see the day approaching.”*

Isn’t that a command to “forsake not”? No, it is an exhortation stated negatively directed to certain people at a certain time. If it were a command of law, many questions would have to be answered with definition. Would it include you and me? Would “not forsaking” mean “never missing”? Or, how many times of missing would amount to forsaking? Would those unable to assemble due to health, occupation (like a sailor), or remote location be in violation? Would it demand meetings annually (like the Passover), monthly, weekly, twice weekly, or daily? Would ten-minute meetings suffice, or must they be 1, 2, 3, or 5 hours, or all day long? Law must be defined in order to be kept and enforced. This exhortation leaves all details to the judgment of the disciples as to what will fulfill the purpose of their meetings.

Then, we must ask what is the purpose to be fulfilled? A roll check? To measure our righteousness? To prove our faith? To demonstrate to the world that we sacrifice our time in serving the Lord? To keep a commandment? None of the above!

As the day of the Lord was approaching, the Hebrews epistle was written as a sort of last plea for Israel to accept and hold faithfully to their Messiah so as to escape the soon

avenging of their nation for their rejection. The events predicted by Jesus in Matthew 24 and other related passages were close at hand. Because the stir of rebellion and persecution were already working against believers in Christ, the epistle also addresses them to encourage faithfulness. So they would need strength from each other. They could help to encourage and build each other up, not by “going to church” to perform rituals that pointed vertically, but by looking horizontally to build each other and stabilize their faith. Thus their activities were designed to provoke / stir up to love and good works. The idea of “going to church to worship” is not in the text but has been read into it by our traditional misguidance. So also has the concept of being stirred up to cooperative love and good works through an organized system been read into the text. The dedicated life is a total offering of worship and service, not just at certain places and times, but in constant use of the gifts of God in personal ministry. Does the text call for the disciples to pay professionals to do the stirring up and provoking? Does it suggest that they put the money they could use for love and good works into real estate and salaries of professionals, except for 1% to 5% as most congregations budget? OK, I am crowding too much together here. I hope to deal with various points more fully in later essays.

This text was addressed to Hebrew disciples in the first century, not to you and me. Do we need one another as they did. Yes! Then that answers our question, “Why assemble?” We assemble to help and to be helped. We participate for mutual edification rather than for presenting a concert to God. Yes, we may and should worship in gatherings but there is no instruction emphasizing these gatherings as “worship services.” Those meetings may involve all the disciples in an area, or lesser numbers in homes or wherever.

What if we dutifully go to those meetings for upbuilding and encouragement and our “leaders” do not have the gumption to conduct uplifting meetings? What if we leave the gatherings feeling more beaten down and depressed than when we came? When you have specific needs and a “one size fits all” ritualistic, impersonal program fails to touch on your needs, what help have you received? Who can claim that attendance is compulsory if the assemblies fail in their purpose? The only purpose left in such a case is to attend in order to reform the situation. If the congregation accepts no redirection, then it is better to look elsewhere, even if it means just spending the time at home in reading, meditation, and prayer. Do I sound too harsh? I am facing reality. The “faithful” may return the next time because they have been intimidated into thinking it is their duty even though their needs are not met. To my dismay, I must admit that I spent a career leading in meetings where too often I droned dismal, depressing discourses on disputed doctrines which offered little to sustain hearers. With from five to eighteen lessons per week I had to prepare and deliver, how relevant and alive could we expect them to be?

Now, maybe you will need another tranquilizer, or to share a glass of wine with Timothy, to get through this paragraph! Assemblies are not as important for us today as they were for the Hebrew disciples addressed in the epistle. Because they had limited means of communication, they had to go to a central source for information and communication.

We have telephones, mail, and email with which to communicate without having to go to a meeting somewhere else. We have our own Bibles, books, and literature to give us strengthening resources. You have a great source of helpful material accessible on the internet. You have tapes of uplifting spiritual songs. Messages fitting your needs are available on tapes, radio, television, and the internet. The early disciples had none of these, so they depended upon gathering with others who might impart knowledge and build faith.

These are good and helpful, but they still cannot take the place of personal contact. So interpersonal relationships should be a great part of our meetings together. They are cultivated better in informal associations than in orderly rituals..

In a manner of speaking, I can say that the internet is my “assembly” though I also go to assemblies. Through interchange with you in various parts of the world, mutual edification is real and much more inspiring generally than what I experience in assemblies.

Just the other day, I suggested to Mira that, when I die, my “memorial service” be conducted on the internet. She could invite all of you whom God has sent into my life to email to her what you would wish to say at my memorial service and, in return, she could email the collection of your expressions back for all of you to share. What a wonderful assembly that would be in my “church house” -- the World Wide Web! I thought of that first, so don’t beat me to it! :-)

“We ought to see how each of us may best arouse others to love and active goodness, not staying away from our meetings, as some do, but rather encouraging one another, all the more because you see the Day drawing near.” (NEB)

I hope to touch on other aspects of “Why Assemble?” in future emails though they are not written yet. God bless.

(Cecil Hook; August 2003).