

WHY ASSEMBLE? No. 2

Last week's "Why Assemble? No. 1" brought an unusual number of responses. Thank you for your insights and confirmation. All were positive except one. I may publish those notes as a FR issue soon. If so, I will reveal your identity only with your permission.

In our previous lesson we proposed that the purpose for assemblies was for mutual edification of those involved. Here we will add to that and suggest activities other than our so-called "five acts of worship" that may be appropriate.

A meeting may be called for discussion of the business of the group or to formulate plans of their work together. An extended session with area disciples may be for discussion of doctrinal and practical issues (Acts 15). They may meet for a period of prayer or singing, to hear a chorus, or to conduct a singing class. The church may attend a city-wide meeting. They may gather at their building or a funeral home for the funeral of one of their number and then collect again at the cemetery. Coming together at any designated place, they may celebrate a wedding and enjoy a reception afterwards. Disciples may congregate at a park or a camp for an extended time of fun, eating, learning, and worship together. Paul instructed the church in Corinth to deliver an incestuous man to Satan in a meeting (1 Cor. 5:3-5). Paul told those same people to wait for one another when they came together for a meal in which they shared the Lord's Supper (11:17-34). The church may meet to clean and repair their building or to repair the house of a needy person. A church may come together at any place at any time for any worthwhile purpose that will benefit those who participate.

Most of you, I assume, will agree with these suggestions. However, due to distinctions which have become accepted traditionally among us, some of you may disagree.

Did you noticed that I did not use the word "assembly" above? I did not use that word because an unwarranted distinction has been made by many between an assembly and a meeting, a congregating, a gathering, or a coming together. When mention is made of an assembly, it is too often interpreted as "THE assembly," distinct from those other synonymous expressions. The mind pictures a Sunday "worship service" (a term not used in the Scriptures), a time of ritualistic worship directed to God. If a congregation of thirty meet in a home for a Bible discussion, it is just a get-together, but if they meet in the "church building," it becomes a worship assembly. Right? Isn't it time we erased such false distinctions? Adding a meal to that still does not change the acceptability. If it is wrong to eat where we worship, it is wrong to worship where we eat. That being true, it would be sinful to offer thanks for dinner at home.

In regard to our assemblies, the inspired writers do not speak of going to worship, preparing to worship, starting our worship, concluding our worship, returning to worship,

conducting our worship, leading our worship, apart from our worship, acts of worship, or house of worship. Why would this be? It is because that, in becoming a disciple, a person surrenders the whole self in full dedication to God. He becomes a living sacrifice constantly and totally offered to God. That is full-time worship! This person does not go to an assembly in order to give a segment of time and self in worship and service to God; however, this person may and should assemble with others at appropriate times for edification which may include worshipping together. The emphasis there is not on going in order to worship but on worshipping together. The worshipping does not begin or stop with an assembly, but a period of more ritualistic worship may be enjoyed together.

There is no record of Jesus' disciples setting aside a time each day or week to worship Jesus, nor did Jesus require that they worship God in such designated sessions. Jesus was actually leading away from expressions of worship through lawful rites and ceremonies and pointing to true spiritual devotion of the dedicated life.

A person may be caught up in emotional ceremonial worship while ignoring, or refusing to speak to, others in the same room. That person may be unforgiving of others or even humiliate them. Instead of that person lifting up hands to God, they ought to be stretched out to the ones offended. That is the way to honor Jesus, for *"Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me"* (Matt. 25:40, 45). Public piety can easily become hypocritical: *"If any one says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen"* (1 John 4:20). Loving and honoring his children is the way God wants us to honor him.

How slow we have been to understand so as to change our vocabulary. We speak of "coming into your presence" as though God is not with us every moment of life, and as though God's presence is in a building instead of his Spirit living in us. Hearing someone piously declare that he can sense God's presence in the gathering leads me to question if he has sensed his presence always since he received him in baptism. To exhort to "take time to be holy" is about as appropriate as exhorting to take time to be a human being, for that is what we are. If you are holy -- dedicated, sanctified, set apart -- that cannot be scheduled or measured by allotment of time. At the taking of collections, often someone expresses that we are giving back to God a portion of what he has given us. If that be true, we have certainly short-changed God. If we are dedicated as a whole-life offering to God, that means that all we are and have are given back to him. The money with which you buy groceries, pay rent, or buy a television is just as dedicated/holy as that which is put into the collection. We, not things, are holy, so we present our selves as living sacrifices of worship, holy and acceptable in his sight.

Singing praise to God is appropriate in private and at all gatherings, but the recent innovation of directing all of our singing to God as praise is off balance. The purpose of our assemblies is not to ritually praise God but, rather, it is to edify one another. God has no needs; we do. This is emphasized by Paul in the two chapters in which he offers corrective teaching about their conduct in the gatherings of the Corinthian church.

The uplifting prayers and prophesying by women in assemblies in Corinth were of questionable value if the women failed to dress and conduct themselves decorously. A good lesson can be spoiled by inappropriate conduct of the teacher or pulpiteer.

In their pot-luck meals in which they also shared the Lord's Supper, they were selfishly disrespecting one another and, by their divisiveness, were participating in an unworthy manner. They were called to self-examination. They were reminded that Jesus said, "Do this in remembrance of me." The purpose of participation was to strengthen their faith through remembering afresh the basis of their salvation rather than performing acts intended to please God (See 1 Cor. 11:17-34). Being rudely inconsiderate of one another in eating the meal, they were disregarding and hindering the bonding which the meal was intended to have nurtured.

Mutual edification is emphasized throughout Chapter 14. Displaying their tongue-speaking when there was no interpreter to make it beneficial to the hearer, Paul said sarcastically that only God could understand them. "*On the other hand, he who prophesies speaks to men for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. ..but he who prophesies edifies the church.*" The gift was to be used only "*so that the church may be edified*" (14:1-5). "*Since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church*" (v. 12). Notice the repeated emphasis that activities in the assembly were for the benefit of the believers, not a ritualistic praise of God.

Praying and singing were not gifts to be displays to impress man or God. "*What am I to do? I will pray with the spirit and I will pray with the mind also; I will sing with the spirit and I will sing with the mind also. ... For you may give thanks well enough, but the other man is not edified*" (v. 13-19). The special gifts they had then were not given for display but for teaching (v. 20-25).

Again, we ask: Were the activities in their assemblies for the benefit of God or man? Paul gives a summary and conclusive answer: "*What then, brethren? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification*" (v. 26). Then Paul devotes the rest of the chapter to instructions concerning conducting orderly meetings conducive of learning and encouragement. To enable that, "*All things should be done decently and in order*" (v.40).

Rituals do little to fill our needs and to bond us. Assemblies should provide a setting conducive for learning truth and of interaction with others. They should lift up rather than drag us down -- or beat us down. If we are not smart enough to conduct such assemblies, maybe we should be smart enough to dismiss for coffee and doughnuts and visiting and planning for home groups where individual needs may be addressed better.

Look for more next week. May God give you comfort and strength this week.

(Cecil Hook; August 2003) []