

WHY ASSEMBLE? No. 3

“Our main purpose in assembling is to partake of the Lord’s Supper,” you say? Many will agree with that assertion though our answers may be ambiguous. For many, missing the singing, prayers, collection, and sermon because of tardiness or lack of time usually causes less concern than missing the Communion. Though it is generally given center stage, too often, it is performed rather perfunctorily and the monologue by a speaker overshadows it. Let us ask and seek to learn what is taught, commanded, or set as a precedent in the Scriptures.

As the apostles were participating in the Passover, Jesus added a new meaning to it. For centuries the Passover meal had been a memorial and reminder of the sparing of their firstborn sons and Israel’s delivery from Egyptian slavery involving the sprinkling of the blood of a lamb and their eating of its flesh with unleavened bread, wine, and bitter herbs. Jesus appropriated the bread and wine to be a reminder of his body and blood (life) offered to free mankind from the slavery of sin and death.

Matthew records: *“Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, ‘Take, eat; this is my body.’ And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink of it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins’”* (Matt. 26:26-28; see Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:17-19). This was shared among the apostles only, and only on that one weekday evening. He did not tell them to continue the practice or to teach others to do it. We read nothing more about the Lord’s Supper until we reach Paul’s first epistle to the Corinthians.

“Not so fast,” someone protests, “what about Acts 2:42 and Acts 20:7?” In concluding his record of the Pentecost event Luke states, *“And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers”* (2:42). It has been strongly contended that the “breaking of bread” refers to the Lord’s Supper. That could be, but do you know for sure? “Breaking of bread” was a common idiom of speech meaning to eat a meal together. A few lines after mentioning the breaking of bread, Luke wrote, *“And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts...”* (2:46). Here he plainly identifies it as partaking of food. Did Luke give the idiom two different meanings in such a short time? They were breaking this bread day by day, not week by week, and it was being done in their homes. If you think that refers to the Lord’s Supper, don’t try that in your home or the elders will be on your case! :-)

What does this prove? Nothing, really! Who can prove that 2:42 refers to the Lord’s Supper? No one! Any conclusion based on an unproven premise is invalid! We have tried to make a judgment drawn from a questionable premise into a law, and that ain’t

too smart! If we look to their breaking bread as a precedent to be followed, why are not all their other activities in 2:42-47 precedents to be followed also?

The same rule applies to Acts 20:7. Here is the only instance where “breaking of bread” is connected with the first day of the week. To make our “on each Sunday, and only on Sunday” law, we grasped and twisted this text to reach a doubly-illogical conclusion. Let us examine the text.

“On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them, intending to depart on the morrow; and he prolonged his speech until midnight.” As Paul talked longer after midnight, Eutychus sank into a deep sleep, fell out the third-story window, and was taken up dead. Paul went down and restored his life. *“And when Paul had gone up and had broken bread and eaten, he conversed with them a long time, until daybreak, and so departed.”*

That must have been an exciting event for the disciples at Troas. The great apostle Paul with his traveling companions was to be with them. They came together to break bread -- to partake of the Lord’s Supper? Or to have a fellowship meal? Have it your way! It does not imply that they had been doing that each first day of the week or continued to do it each week thereafter. The text only says they did it that day. What conclusion may we infer about continuity of weekly communion? Absolutely none! If I tell you that on Thursday, when I was going to work, I had a wreck, could you sanely conclude that each Thursday before I had been having wrecks and that I continued to have one each Thursday after that? Why do we forsake all sense of logic when we want to prove a point?

Remember, that has been our only proof-text relating the Lord’s Supper to the first day of the week! Being based on an unproven premise that it was the Lord’s Supper instead of a pot-luck supper, our conclusion is faulty. And, even granting for argument’s sake that it really was the Lord’s Supper, it would become an example of the Supper on Monday morning instead of the first day of the week!

If they reckoned by Jewish time, they met after sunset on the first day, and the next morning would still have been the first day. Paul was “intending to depart on the morrow” so he could not have left after daybreak, for it would have still been the first day. According to Roman time, they met on our Sunday which began at midnight on our Saturday evening. It was after midnight Sunday when he broke bread, that being Monday morning. It being the morrow, Paul departed. So we have no precedent for breaking bread on the first day of the week! But breaking it on Monday was OK!

What is the point? Am I discrediting the Lord’s Supper? Not at all. I am emphatically denying that our purpose of assembling is to fulfill commands to come together each and every first day of the week and only on that day to partake of the Lord’s Supper. My aim is to take it completely out of the realm of legal requirements where we have labored to put it.

Then, why do we partake of it? Paul tells the Corinthians the purpose Jesus gave for participation. “*..and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, ‘This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes*” (1 Cor. 11:23-26).

Jesus told his apostles to partake in remembrance of him and his atoning death. In this text Paul indicates that it included the Corinthians also. Their purpose, however, was not just to obey a command, but it was to bring to remembrance what it meant -- the very basis of their hope. Keeping this in focus would be a constant strengthening and building up of their faith. So this would be in harmony with the general purpose of assemblies -- the edification of the disciples. Participation was not to gain justification, to receive a sacramental blessing, to gain forgiveness, to honor fallen war heroes, or to bolster the sermon of the occasion. To have communion comments relating it to the day’s sermon each week is a real stretch.

In this ritual meal Paul indicated, “*You proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.*” Some conclude that this memorial supper was to extend only until the return of Jesus in the “parousia” in the events surrounding AD 70. Even though it might be projected to that time, there is no indication that it was to be discontinued then. Do believers still need the constant reminders that build their faith? Surely, you must agree. If the supper served for edification then, can it not still serve that purpose?

Paul’s corrective instruction to the Corinthians implies that their sharing in the supper was ongoing, but there is no instruction as to frequency or on certain days. By building on questionable premises, our people have demanded that it be on each and every Sunday and on no other day. Why would we make such an interpretation into a law? Has it not been because we wanted to know when we have fulfilled a law, a requirement of Jesus, or an apostolic command? That warps the purpose into legalism rather than meeting to share in a strengthening communion with one another and with God. If Jesus had that purpose in mind, he surely would have revealed it to us so we would not have to depend on our questionable and illogical inferences.

Most of the divisions in our movement derived from our legalistic interpretations about our assemblies, our trying to find a law, pattern, or precedent so we could cross every lawful “t” and dot each legal “i” we inferred in hair-splitting detail for justification. The result: Instead of making assemblies into sessions of edification we turned them into demonstrations of alienation, disruption, and division. We can do better! Let us focus on the “why” instead of the less important “how” and “when.”

Other points about assemblies are discussed in FREE TO ACCEPT, Chapter 17, “Thursday Is The Lord’s Day Too”; Chapter 18, “Not Forsaking The Assembly,” and Chapter 19, “Acts 20:7 One More Time.”

(Cecil Hook; September 2003) []