

**WHY ASSEMBLE? No. 4**

We agree, I assume, that disciples may meet together for any purpose that promotes their wellbeing. We will agree also, will we not, that there were regular assemblies for mutual edification though no schedule for them is prescribed in the Scriptures. “*When you assemble as a church,*” (1 Cor. 11:18) implies an assembly as a distinct entity. “*When you meet together,*” “*when you come together to eat, wait for one another,*” “*if, therefore the whole church assembles,*” and “*When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, ..*” (11:20; 11:33; 14:23; 14:26) -- these terms indicate that general assemblies were conducted even though no schedule is implied. Among these passages the purpose of mutual edification is most clearly set forth.

Did “*the whole church*” mean literally every believer in Corinth? We must not try to fit the Corinthian church into the template of a small Southern town with a group of one or two hundred disciples. After Paul’s failure with the Jews there, he turned to the Gentiles, “*and MANY of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized. And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, ‘Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man will attack you to harm you; for I have MANY people in this city.’ And he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them*” (Acts 18:8-11). Two hundred would hardly be called “many” in the great city of Corinth. So Paul is evidently addressing problems common throughout Corinth and “the whole church” being assembled would indicate congregational entities rather than the rounding up of every believer in Corinth into one assembly.

In our tradition, we have come to think of the Sunday morning gathering as the sort of “official assembly” though their meetings in early times before Sunday was made a holy day were more likely in the evenings after work. One thing was absent from their meetings which may strike us as unbelievable. They had no preaching! No preaching? Our kids might say with delight, “Wow -- no preaching!”

Allowing for gaps in my memory, I recall going to only one Sunday morning assembly in the last seventy-five years where there was no speaker! On that occasion over sixty years ago, I dropped in where there were only about a dozen women meeting in the courthouse in Guthrie, Texas. We may always expect that sermon. So, may we rightly conclude that our reason for regular assemblies is for preaching? If, as I have proposed in this series, our purpose for assembling is for mutual edification, the answer is a surprising “no”! (I will make exceptions later.) Preaching is not for edification of believers but for conversion of unbelievers.

In what we call the Great Commission, Jesus charged his disciples to go into all the world and preach the gospel / make disciples of all nations and then to teach the disciples. The gospel is the power of God unto salvation (Rom. 1:17). It was fully proclaimed on Pentecost before any instructive epistle was written. The gospel is the good news of

salvation through Christ. Paul later epitomized it as the message of the death, burial, and resurrection. In more detail it would include the pertinent facts included by Peter on Pentecost and of other convincing details to bring about conversion. Proclaiming the gospel produced disciples who then needed to be taught to observe all things Jesus had commanded.

The gospel was preached -- heralded, proclaimed, evangelized -- while the doctrine was made known by teaching, instruction, reproof, rebuke, and exhortation. The gospel message was conveyed through evangelists (preachers), but prophets, pastors (shepherds, elders), and teachers edified through teaching. While there may be some overlap of preaching and teaching, these exercises were for two distinct purposes -- evangelizing to make disciples and teaching to confirm and edify the disciples. The assemblies were devoted to that edification.

This is not to imply that it would be sinful to proclaim the gospel in the presence of an assembly of disciples. It is an impractical and unwise use of time and opportunity. If a life insurance salesman convinced you of the need for a policy and you bought it, why would he come back week after week trying to convince you to buy it again? That would be as sensible as evangelizing followers of Jesus week after week when what they need is to be taught those things which will make their discipleship enduring and fruitful.

Where in the Scriptures is there record of preaching in the church? Yes, I know that in the KJV, Acts 20:7 says when the disciples gathered together to break bread Paul preached to them. That, however is a bad translation. The word used there means to discourse or dialogue in a more conversational manner. The RV says he talked with them. Who were those disciples? The Spirit had forbidden Paul to preach there previously (Acts 16:6-10). Some of Paul's traveling companions mentioned in Acts 20:1-6 were waiting for him there and they met for a meal. Hardly a congregation with a pattern of worship!

The gospel was not preached to the church. There is no record of such, no instruction for it, and no need for it. Although the word "preach" is used over one hundred times in the New Testament writings, it is not used in reference of a believing assembly. It is the word for "evangelize." The message is the gospel, the good news, the "evangel," while the one who proclaims it is the preacher, the evangelist.

Other verbs relate to the edification of the saints. For example, in First Corinthians 14, there are fifty uses of verbs of communication in the assembly, such as speak, prophesy, utter, interpret, instruct, teach, declare, pray, sing, bless, and say, but preach or evangelize is not used. Revelation, knowledge, prophesy, and teaching are mentioned, but not preaching. Prophecy was delivering a message given through a spiritual gift.

Paul wrote that "prophecy is not for unbelievers but for the believers" (1 Cor. 14:22). "He who prophesies edifies the church" (v. 4). "When you come together, let all things be done for edification" (v. 26). So the prophetic teaching was for believers and

preaching was for unbelievers. The hired minister is commonly called a preacher or an evangelist when he may actually limit his work to teaching and pastoring the congregation.

He may mention the gospel when “extending the invitation” at the close of a lesson about any subject but that could hardly qualify as evangelism.

This is a matter of judging what is practical. During most of my career, it was commonly expected that the Sunday evening meeting be directed toward evangelism. Often there was no unbeliever, or only a very few, present to hear the message heard over and over by the believers. Paul allows the possibility of unbelievers entering the assembly (1 Cor. 14:23). The believers needed instruction and edification, not conversion. We also have commonly conducted special evangelistic meetings for which I offer no criticism.

The distinctions I have been making in this series on “Why Assemble?” are not meant to be dogmatic. Because I am saying that the emphasis of our regular assemblies should be horizontal in edification, I am not meaning that they should be void of vertical upreach in praise and prayer or of any outreach through the gospel message. But we do not assemble to evangelize the believers. Preachers and preaching are out of place there.

You may read more on this subject in *Free In Christ*, Ch. 8 and *The Twisted Scriptures*, Ch. 4, by Carl Ketcherside. These and all my other books may be ordered by email. They are listed at our web site <[www.freedomstring.org](http://www.freedomstring.org)>.

(Cecil Hook; September 2003) []