

**APPLYING NEW TESTAMENT INSTRUCTION  
CONCERNING THE CHURCH  
TO THE PRESENT DAY**

Paul L. Canner

*Christian Literature, 706 Hilton Avenue, Baltimore, MD 21228-5820, USA*



## 1. Introduction

In the New Testament we read of the formation of the Church, its unity, worship, ministry, government, and discipline. In New Testament times there was, in every sense of the word, *one* body of believers.

Since New Testament days the outward testimony of the Church has been broken into several thousand pieces, which we call denominations or fellowships. Given this sad state of affairs, what is the Christian to do? Some counsel us, “Go to the church of your choice.” That is poor advice because it suggests that we are capable of coming up with reasonable criteria on our own for selecting the most suitable church fellowship. It also suggests that the differences among churches and fellowships are relatively trivial. This is not at all the case, for some deny fundamental teachings of the Bible such as the deity, virgin birth, and resurrection of Christ and salvation by faith alone; some wink at serious sins that are utterly condemned by the Bible; and others seek to be guided, in doctrine and practice, by the Bible alone.

Some offer better counsel: Find a Bible-believing church, one that teaches and seeks to live and operate according to the Bible, the Word of God. But we still will find a great variety of churches, assemblies, fellowships, and denominations that claim to be Bible-believing, but differ widely among themselves in doctrine, practice, and organization.

The best we can do is:

- a. Study, study, and study some more what the Bible teaches about the Church.
- b. Pray earnestly that the Lord will help us to understand rightly what the Bible teaches concerning Christ and the Church.
- c. Pray for a pure heart for ourselves and a deep desire to know and do God’s will in *all* things in our personal life.
- d. Pray that the Lord will lead us to others who “call on the Lord out of a pure heart” (2 Tim. 2:22), thus forming the basis for church fellowship that is in accordance with Biblical principles.

Is church fellowship really such a big deal? Yes, it surely is. Here is Christ’s own attitude about the Church: “Christ loved the Church and gave Himself for it; that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the Word; that He might present it to Himself a glorious Church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish” (Eph. 5:25-27). So Christ not only gave Himself for *individuals*, He gave Himself for *the Church* as a *body* of believers. The Church is precious in *His* sight. May we, as those who are being changed into Christ’s image (2 Cor. 3:18), find His Church to be precious in *our* sight as well.

In this paper we will briefly discuss the historical background of the Church—when it began and of whom it consists. Then we will study the characteristics of the early Church, including:

- a. Its being one body and a unity of assemblies.
- b. Its being the house of God, the pillar and ground of the truth.
- c. Its heavenly character and hope.
- d. Its members being gathered together unto the Lord’s name often for the breaking of bread, prayer, and ministry of the Word.
- e. The priesthood of *all* its members.
- f. The equipping and responsibility of *all* its members for ministry and service in the assembly.
- g. The existence and role of overseers and guides in the local assembly.
- h. Its carrying out of Church discipline.

After this we will tackle the issue that is so controversial in the Church today, namely, how do we manifest the unity of assemblies or express the truth that there is one body in an age in which the Church is splintered into thousands of different denominations, sects, and fellowships.

Finally, for those who truly believe they are following Biblical teaching about the Church as best as they possibly can, I will offer suggestions as to how they can do it even better. May it be the earnest prayer of each believer in Christ and member of the Church that we not only improve, day by day, in our walk with and likeness to Christ, but that we and our fellow members of the body of Christ will be increasingly faithful to the plan, organization, and practical conduct of the Church according to the Word of God.

As we anticipate reading the following sections, may we all—writer and reader alike—be much in prayer about this matter that is so important to the One who loved the Church and gave Himself for it.

## **2. The Beginning and Membership of the Church**

There are some Bible scholars who teach that the Church consists of all believers in every age. John Calvin taught that Galatians 4:1-4 refers to the Church in its childhood in Old Testament times. Surely there were many true believers in the Old Testament (Rom. 4:1-8; Heb. 11:1-32). However, there is Scriptural evidence to show that the Church was not formed until the Day of Pentecost as described in Acts 2:

a. Jesus said to Peter, “Upon this rock I *will* build My Church” (Matt. 16:18). The apostle Paul declared, “That Rock was Christ” (1 Cor. 10:4); and the apostle Peter referred to the Lord Jesus as “a living stone” and “a chief cornerstone” (1 Pet. 2:4-8; see also Eph. 2:20).

b. It is by the Holy Spirit that we are “baptized into one body” (1 Cor. 12:13). Jesus, after His resurrection, told His disciples that they would “be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days hence” (Acts 1:5,8). On the Day of Pentecost those disciples (about 120 of them, Acts 1:15) were gathered together when the Holy Spirit came down and filled them (Acts 2:1-13). The apostle Peter preached to the multitude gathered to celebrate the feast of Pentecost; about 3,000 received his word and “were added unto them” (that is, unto the 120 or so original members of the Church; Acts 2:41). At the end of the chapter we read that “the Lord added to the Church daily such as should be saved” (2:47).

The Greek word translated “church” in the New Testament is *ekklesia*. The word *ekklesia* literally means “called out ones” and was used generally by Greeks to refer to “an assembly of the citizens summoned by the town crier.” The early Church was made up of Jews who, upon believing on the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation, were called out from the Jewish religion to be members of the body of Christ (Acts 2:44,46). Later on, when the gospel came to the Gentiles, many of them also believed and were called out of their pagan religions and joined with the Jewish believers in the same body, the Church (Acts 15:14; Eph. 2:11-21).

In this paper, we will use “Church” with capital C to denote the Church of Christ in its entirety, worldwide (such as Eph. 5:23), and “church” with lower-case c to denote a congregation or expression of the Church in a certain place (such as Gal. 1:2). The Bible does not—nor will we—use the word “church” to designate a building where Christians meet together.

Clearly, the word *ekklesia* goes far beyond simple membership in a body. As mentioned above, it expresses the thought of an assembling of people. The chief activity of the local *ekklesia* or church is being assembled together for worship, prayer, ministry of the Word of God, or decision-making. We will often use the word “assembly” in this paper, especially in reference to the believers gathered together in a particular place.

In the Old Testament the faithful ones were primarily individual believers, vitally and eternally linked with God. Their unity was that of the family or tribe and they were represented by *twelve* loaves of showbread in the holy place of the tabernacle (Lev. 24:5). Since Pentecost in Acts 2, the believers enjoy not only the vertical link with God as their Father and with the Lord Jesus Christ as their Saviour, but a horizontal link with every other believer as “one body in Christ, and every one members one of another” (Rom. 12:5). Believers are now represented by *one* loaf (1 Cor. 10:17). Surely the unity of the different parts of a body is much closer even than the unity of members of the same family.

## **3. Characteristics of the Early Church: The Church as One Body and a Unity of Assemblies**

The night before He was crucified, the Lord Jesus prayed a high priestly, intercessory prayer to His Father concerning His disciples. He prayed, “Holy Father, keep through Thine own name those whom Thou hast given me, that they may be one, as we are” (John 17:11). Jesus knew there would always be a tendency—aided and abetted by Satan—for His disciples to go their separate ways and start their own ministries and

congregations. So He expresses, not only for His Father's "ears" but for those of His disciples as well, His desire that His disciples remain united in spirit after His departure.

The Lord does not stop there: "Neither pray I for these alone [that is, the twelve disciples minus Judas], but for those also who will believe on Me through their word; that they all may be one; as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be one in Us: that the world may believe that Thou hast sent Me"

(17:20,21). This unity desired first for His disciples was to extend to all believers in Christ. One very practical effect of such a unity would be its testimony to the watching world that Jesus Christ had truly been sent by God ("Thou hast sent Me").

In answer to this prayer, the Holy Spirit came down and baptized the believers in Christ "into *one* body" (1 Cor. 12:13). At the risk of being repetitive, let us quote several verses that refer to the **one body** of believers in Christ.

"For as we have many members in **one body**, and all members have not the same office, so we, being many are **one body** in Christ, and every one members one of another" (Rom. 12:4,5).

"The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we being many are one bread, and **one body**: for we are all partakers of that one bread" (1 Cor. 10:16,17).

"For as the [human] body is one and has many members, and all the members of that **one body**, being many, are **one body**: so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptized into **one body**, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free.... For the body is not one member, but many" (1 Cor. 12:12-14).

"That He might reconcile both [Jew and Gentile] unto God in **one body** by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby.... There is **one body**" (Eph. 2:16; 4:4).

"Let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also you are called in **one body**" (Col. 3:15).

I have heard or read it expressed a number of times: "God has arranged the Church into many different denominations so that each believer may select the one with the kind of pastor, manner of worship, scheme of church government, or variety of activities that best suit his/her needs or personality." **NOT SO!** By no means is God responsible for the many denominations and divisions of the Church! Sinful man is responsible for them! I will elaborate on this point in Section 11.

In the early years of the Church, there was indeed *one* body in every sense of the word. There were no divisions, no denominations. It is true that there were assemblies of believers in many different countries, states, cities, and villages. But the New Testament clearly shows that a strong unity existed among these assemblies. There existed what is sometimes termed "a circle of fellowship." The Church, the whole body of believers, did not consist of many *independent* local assemblies but of *interdependent* assemblies, geographically separated but united together as a complete and entire organism, responsive and accountable to one another and to Christ in heaven. We will now present various Scriptural evidences of this unity.

**The Use of Letters of Commendation.** When brothers or sisters from one assembly visited another assembly, they carried with them letters of introduction and commendation from their home assembly, or from a well-known believer (such as the apostle Paul), to the assembly being visited. These are referred to in 2 Cor. 3:1: "Do we begin again to commend ourselves? or need we, as some others, epistles of commendation to you, or letters of commendation from you?" After Apollos had been taught by Aquila and Priscilla "the way of God more perfectly," he prepared to travel on to Achaia. So "the brethren wrote, exhorting the disciples to receive [Apollos], who, when he was come, helped them much who had believed through grace" (Acts 18:24-28).

In a sense the Epistle to the Romans is a letter of commendation that the apostle Paul expanded into a lengthy treatise of doctrinal and practical ministry. Near the end of the letter Paul writes: "I commend unto you Phoebe our sister, who is a servant of the church that is at Cenchrea, that you receive her in the Lord, as becomes saints, and that you assist her in whatever business she has need of you, for she has been a [helper] of many, and of myself also" (Rom. 16:1,2). These two verses provide a good model for a letter of commendation.

An alternative to a *letter* of commendation is found in Acts 9:26,27 where Barnabas *personally* commended Saul of Tarsus to the believers in Jerusalem: "When Saul was come to Jerusalem, he [tried] to join himself to the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, and believed not that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles, and declared unto them how he had seen the Lord in the way, and that he had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus."

Letters of commendation have in large measure fallen out of use today. But they still serve an important purpose, both of introducing a visiting brother or sister who is in fellowship in another assembly, and of expressing the unity that exists among the assemblies. This writer would encourage each Christian assembly to reinstitute the provision of letters of commendation to believers visiting assemblies where they are not well known.

**The Ministry of Paul.** The apostle Paul did not confine his ministry to one assembly. In addition to helping to establish assemblies of believers in many places, he revisited most of these plus many others in order to build up the saints through ministry of the Word of God. He also wrote letters (called “epistles” in our Bibles) to a number of them, addressing problems specific to each one. In his epistles to the assemblies, Paul often sought to remind the saints of their unity with all of the other assemblies in the Church as a whole: “The churches of Christ salute you” (Rom. 16:16). “Paul ... unto the church of God that is at Corinth ... with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord” (1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1). “I have sent unto you Timothy ... who will bring you into remembrance of my ways that be in Christ, as I teach everywhere in every church” (1 Cor. 4:17). “As the Lord has called every one, so let him walk. And so ordain I in all churches” (1 Cor. 7:17). “Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given order to the churches of Galatia, even so do you” (1 Cor. 16:1).

**The Help of Assemblies One for Another.** A particular manifestation of the interdependence of assemblies in the early Church was the way the different local assemblies helped each other: “Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God has prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come. And when I come, whomever you will approve by your letters, them will I send to bring your liberality unto Jerusalem” (1 Cor. 16:2,3; also 2 Cor. 8:1-15; 9:1-15).

Even though Philippi was not the apostle Paul’s home assembly (he was sent out from Antioch, Acts 13:1-3), the assembly at Philippi ministered often to the apostle’s temporal needs: “Know also that ... when I departed from Macedonia, no church communicated with me as concerning giving and receiving, but you only. For even in Thessalonica you sent once and again unto my necessity” (Phil. 4:14-18).

**The Uniting of Believers of Various Ethnic Backgrounds.** The earliest members of the Church were Jewish converts to Christ. The first were 120 or so disciples of the Lord (Acts 1:15) upon whom the Holy Spirit came on the day of Pentecost. These were soon followed by 3,000 more Jewish men and women who responded to the preaching of the apostle Peter (Acts 2:41). Later, Philip “preached Christ unto [the Samaritans].” Many believed, following which they received the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:5-17). Then the apostle Peter was sent by the Spirit to the house of Cornelius, the Roman soldier. After Peter presented the gospel, Cornelius and others in his household believed, and the same Holy Spirit came upon them as well. The Jewish believers with Peter “were astonished ... because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Spirit, for they heard them speak with tongues and magnify God” (Acts 10:45,46).

There had existed a longstanding animosity between the Jews and the Samaritans, the latter being largely made up of stragglers from the ten tribes that broke away from the tribes of Judah and Benjamin during the reign of Rehoboam (1 Ki. 11:31; John 4:9). A similar enmity existed between the Jews and the Gentiles (Luke 4:24-29). But God arranged things to show clearly that the same Holy Spirit that brought the Jewish believers into the Church, the body of Christ, brought the Samaritan and Gentile believers into that same body.

The apostle Paul emphasizes the oneness of Jewish and Gentile believers: “He is our peace, who has made both [that is, Jew and Gentile] one, and has broken down the middle wall of partition between us ... to make in Himself of two one new man, so making peace; and that He might reconcile both unto God in one body ... and came and preached peace to you [Gentiles] who were afar off, and to those [Jews] who were nigh. For through Him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father” (Eph. 2: 14-18).

The apostle further emphasizes the importance of maintaining unity between Jews and Gentiles in the body of Christ by beseeching the Ephesian believers that they might “with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love, endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:1-3).

There is not one body or Church for Jews and another for Gentiles; not one Spirit for Jews and another for Samaritans; not one Lord for whites and another for blacks; not one faith for males and another for females; not one baptism for Americans and another for Asians. Rather, “There is *one* body, and *one* Spirit, even as you

are called in *one* hope of your calling; *one* Lord, *one* faith, *one* baptism, *one* God and Father of all” (Eph. 4:4-6).

**The Resolving of Differences Between Assemblies.** The unity of assemblies in the early Church was further demonstrated when “certain men who came down from Judea [to Antioch] taught the brethren and said, “Except you be circumcised after the manner of Moses, you cannot be saved” (Acts 15:1). A delegation of brothers from the Antioch assembly, including Paul and Barnabas, went to Jerusalem to discuss this matter with the believers there. “And when there had been much disputing, Peter rose up, and said unto them, Men and brethren, you know how that a good while ago God made choice among us that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God, who knows the hearts, bore them witness, giving them the Holy Spirit, even as He did unto us; and put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith” (Acts 15:7-9).

After the brethren of both assemblies resolved that the Gentile believers should not be required to be circumcised, the assembly at Jerusalem sent a delegation to the assembly at Antioch confirming the satisfactory agreement reached on the controversial question.

In this account we find a wonderful example of the care, concern, and unity that should exist among the local assemblies in the Church, the one body of Christ. Satan hates this unity of God’s people, and does all he can to disrupt and destroy it. What a credit to both the Antioch and Jerusalem assemblies that the brothers took great pains to resolve the conflict rather than deciding to split and divide over their disagreement.

**Summary.** We have pursued various lines of evidence from the New Testament Scriptures to demonstrate the strong unity that existed among the many local assemblies of believers in the early period of the Church.

- a. Letters of commendation were used to introduce visitors from other assemblies.
- b. The apostle Paul, when writing to specific assemblies, often referred to other assemblies.
- c. The assemblies helped one another in times of need.
- d. Jewish, Samaritan, and Gentile believers were all made members of the same Church.
- e. Care was taken to resolve differences in doctrine and practice that arose among different assemblies.

Even though the unity of assemblies has been tragically broken over the past 2,000 years, let us endeavor, as far as we can within the limits of Scripture, “to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

Later on, after giving other characteristics of the early Church, we will explore from the Scriptures ways we can best achieve at least a tiny degree of God’s intended unity among assemblies.

#### 4. The Church as the House of God

“House of God” is an expression often used by people to denote a church building. However, the following verses show us that the house of God is not a structure of wood, brick, and stone, but a building whose “stones” are people.

“You also, as living stones, are built up a spiritual house” (1 Pet. 2:5).

“Do you not know that you are the temple of God?” (1 Cor. 3:16).

“You ... are built together for a habitation of God through the Spirit” (Eph. 2:22).

“The house of God ... is the Church of the living God” (1 Tim. 3:15). The Church, as we have noted previously, is a body of people, namely, all who have received Christ as Saviour and Lord (Acts 2:47).

This temple or building or house of God does not simply grow by the addition of new members, that is, new converts to Christ. But like a living organism, all parts of it grow. As the individual “living stones” grow spiritually and mature in the faith (Eph. 4:12-16; Col. 1:10; 2:19; 1 Pet. 2:2; 2 Pet. 3:18), the entire house grows.

The house of God is the dwelling place of God. In the Old Testament, God dwelt in the holy of holies, the inner sanctuary of the tabernacle or temple of Israel. Access to that inner room was guarded by a heavy curtain or veil (Exod. 26:33). Only one person—the high priest—was permitted into that most holy place, and only once a year on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:2,29; Heb. 9:7).

One of the wonderful things that happened when Christ died on the cross was that “the veil of the temple was rent in two from the top to the bottom” (Matt. 27:51). This miraculous event signified a new order for God’s people, who now have “boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living

way ... through the veil, that is to say, His flesh" (Heb. 10:20).

But there is a blessing that seems to go beyond even that just described of boldness to enter into the holiest. The members of the Church, the body of Christ, in a sense actually *form* the most holy place, "the temple of God," the dwelling place of God in the Person of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 3:16). This is awesome and most humbling! No wonder the Church is exhorted so often to be holy (Rom. 6:11,19; 12:1; 2 Cor. 7:1; Eph. 5:26; 1 Thess. 4:3,4,7; 1 Tim. 2:15; 2 Tim. 1:9; 2:21; Heb. 12:10,14; 1 Pet. 1:15,16)! "The temple of God is holy, which temple you are" (1 Cor. 3:17).

A different emphasis is placed on the house of God in 1 Tim. 3:15: "The house of God ... is ... the pillar and ground of the truth." Let us understand clearly that the house of God or the Church is not the *source* of the truth. Jesus declared, "I am ... the truth," "Thy *Word* is truth," and "The *Spirit* of truth ... will guide you into all truth" (John 14:6; 17:17; 16:13). The house of God is, first of all, the "pillar" on which the truth is inscribed and proclaimed before the world. Telephone and power poles are frequently used today to post notices about yard sales, lost cats, and upcoming events. So pillars were used in ancient times for the same purpose. God intends that His house serve as a means by which the truth of His Word and the revelation of His own character be proclaimed—both by words and by deeds. The Lord Jesus hinted at this when He said, "By this will all men know that you are My disciples, if you have love one to another," and also when He prayed for all believers "that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that Thou hast sent Me" (John 13:35; 17:21).

God's house is also the "ground [or support] of the truth," or that which holds the truth firmly and steadfastly and defends it against the attacks of the enemy.

Note that these responsibilities concerning "the truth" are not given to individuals but to "the house of God." There are Christian "free-lancers" in the world today who proclaim God's Word with varying degrees of faithfulness, without accountability to other "stones" in God's house. Ministers of God's Word need to give opportunity to other gifted and knowledgeable believers to listen to their teaching and bring correction if necessary. This will result in faithful, true, and united testimony of the Word of God by the house of God.

The truth of the Church as the house or temple of God is linked with a number of important aspects of the Church:

a. The house of God is made up of both Jewish "stones" and Gentile "stones." "The middle wall of partition" between these has been broken down, and through Christ "both have access by one Spirit unto the Father. Now [they] are ... fellow citizens ... of the household of God" (Eph. 2:12-22). (This aspect was discussed in Section 3.)

b. The truth that we—the Church—"are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in [us]" (1 Cor. 3:16) links closely with the words of Christ: "Where two or three are gathered together unto My name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt. 18:20).

c. The believers making up the house of God are not only building blocks in the house but holy priests within the house. "You also, as living stones, are built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ" (1 Pet. 2:5).

d. The house of God, as already mentioned, is connected with ministry of the Word of God: "The house of God ... is ... the pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15).

e. The house of God is linked with order imposed upon each local assembly by means of the service of elders and deacons. After giving qualifications of elders and deacons, the apostle Paul writes, "These things write I unto you ... that you may know how you ought to behave yourself in the house of God" (1 Tim. 3:1-15).

f. The temple of God is holy: "All the building fitly framed together grows unto a holy temple in the Lord" (Eph. 2:21). As a holy temple, discipline must be carried out in order to purge out unholy elements. "Judgment must begin at the house of God" (1 Pet. 4:17); "purge out therefore the old leaven" (1 Cor. 5:7); "put away from among yourselves that wicked person" (1 Cor. 5:13).

Later on we will consider these various features related to the house of God: (a) gathered together unto the name of Christ with Himself in the midst; (b) the priesthood of all believers; (c) the responsibility of *all* believers for ministry and service in the assembly; (d) the role of overseers and deacons in the local assembly; and (e) the carrying out of assembly discipline.



## 5. The Church as the Bride of Christ

“I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ” (2 Cor. 11:2). “Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the Church, and gave Himself for it” (Eph. 5:25). “Alleluia: for the Lord God omnipotent reigns. Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honor to Him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and His wife has made herself ready” (Rev. 19:6,7).

The Church is presented in Scripture in three aspects: (a) its unity as the *body* of Christ; (b) its order and ministry as the *house* and *temple* of God indwelt by the Holy Spirit; and (c) its future hope as the *bride* of Christ. Presently, the Church is seen as engaged to be married to Christ. When the Church is caught up to heaven at the coming of Christ (1 Cor. 15:51-57; 1 Thess. 4:13-18), she will become the bride of the Lamb, her precious Lord and Saviour. While a number of insights into what heaven will be like are given in Scripture, no details concerning this heavenly relationship between the bride and the Bridegroom are divulged. However, the Holy Spirit uses imagery of what many people have experienced as the most happy, joyful, pleasurable relationship known on earth to describe the eternal, heavenly relationship of Christ and the Church. Just as an engaged couple eagerly count the weeks and days (and maybe even the hours and minutes) until their wedding day, so the Church eagerly anticipates the marriage union with her heavenly Bridegroom.

Though the Church has been formed and actively functions on earth, it has a heavenly character and a heavenly hope. We see this in the following ways:

- a. The Church has a *heavenly* Head, One who came down from heaven (John 3:13,31; 6:33,38,41,50,51,58; Eph. 4:9); who even on earth was “in the bosom of the Father” (John 1:18); who returned to heaven (Mark 16:19; Luke 24:51; John 14:1-3; Acts 1:9,10; 3:21; Eph. 4:10; Heb. 4:14; 1 Pet. 3:22); is “crowned with glory and honor” at “the right hand of God” (John 17:1-5,24; Acts 7:56; Heb. 1:3,13; 2:9; 9:24; 10:12; 12:2; Rev. 4:4-11; 5:6-14; 19:11,16; 21:22,23; 22:3); and is coming again from heaven (Matt. 24:30; Mark 14:62; 1 Thess. 1:10; 4:16; 2 Thess. 1:7).
- b. Early members of the Church, including the disciples gathered in Jerusalem on the birthday of the Church, Stephen, and the apostles Peter, Paul, and John, received *heavenly* visions (Acts 2:2; 7:55,56; 9:3-5; 10:10-16; 11:9; 26:19; 2 Cor. 12:1-4; Rev. 1,4,5,19-22).
- c. The members of the Church are *heavenly* citizens with *heavenly* blessings (Rom. 6:4,5; Eph. 1:3; 2:6; 6:12; Phil. 3:10,14,20; Col. 3:1-3).
- d. The Church has a *heavenly* hope (John 14:1-3; 1 Cor. 15:42-54; 2 Cor. 5:1-8; Col. 1:5; 1 Thess. 1:10; 4:13-18; 2 Tim. 2:12; Rev. 19:7-9; 21:1-22:5).

## 6. Characteristics of the Early Church: Assembly Meetings

There is a tendency among Christians today—even among those who are truly born again—to be content with being a part of the “electronic church.” They watch or listen to a certain quota of Christian programs each week—many with profitable ministry no doubt—and feel they have fulfilled their obligation to Christ and His Church.

As noted in Section 2, the Greek word, *ekklesia*, for Church expresses the thought of an assembling of people. The chief activity of the local *ekklesia* or church is being assembled together for worship, prayer, ministry of the Word of God, or decision-making. The Lord Jesus, in anticipating the formation of His body, the Church, expressed it this way: “Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matt. 18:20).

In the first weeks and months of the Church, the believers in their first love came together *daily* to hear the teaching of the apostles, and for fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer (Acts 2:42-47). About 25 years later, the disciples seem to have had the practice of gathering on the first day of the week (that is the Lord’s day or Sunday) to break bread. When the apostle Paul came to Troas, he stayed seven days. “And upon the first day of the week, *when* the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them, ready to depart on the morrow” (Acts 20:6,7). It appears that the apostle stayed in Troas for seven days for the express purpose of

being with the assembly when they “came together to break bread.” They openly expressed their membership in the Church—the body of Christ—by being gathered together around their risen Head.

The expression “gathered together” in Matthew 18:20 is *sunegmenoi*—which refers not so much to a voluntary action by the believers but a being drawn together by the power of the Holy Spirit and attracted to Christ in their midst. The greatest joy of heaven will come from being gathered around our Saviour, with “the Lamb as it had been slain” “in the midst” (Rev. 5:6). It is God’s desire that we should begin to experience this joy on earth by being gathered around the Lord Jesus as members of His body.

What makes these meetings so special is that there is no *human* leader in them. The same Spirit who *gathers* the members of the body together is also the *Leader* who focuses all on Christ the Head in the midst (John 16:14). There are at least four kinds of these meetings:

**The Lord’s Supper or Remembrance Meeting.** The words “came together” in Acts 20:7 are from the Greek word *sunegmenoi*. Thus we have a link with “gathered together” in Matt. 18:20. The purpose of this meeting is to meditate upon the body or person of the Lord Jesus in all His holiness and perfection (Psa. 40:6-10; Luke 1:35; 2:51,52; 3:22; Acts 3:14; 2 Cor. 5:21; Rev. 4:8; etc.) and in all His suffering for our sakes on the cross (Psa. 22:1-21; 69:1-21; Isa. 52:13-53:12; Matt. 26:36-27:50; etc.); and upon the tremendous value of His precious, atoning blood (Rom. 3:25; 5:9; Eph. 1:7; 2:13; Col. 1:20; Heb. 10:19; 1 Pet. 1:19; 1 John 1:7; Rev. 1:5; 5:9; etc.). In this way we “remember” Him and “show the Lord’s death till He come” (1 Cor. 11:24-26). What a precious privilege is afforded us in being gathered together with the Lord Jesus Christ Himself in our midst—both the Object and the Leader (Psa. 22:22; Heb. 2:12) of our praise and worship. It is truly a foretaste of heaven on earth.

**The Assembly Prayer Meeting.** In the immediate context of Matt. 18:20 we read, “If two of you will agree on earth as touching any thing that they will ask, it will be done for them of My Father who is in heaven” (verse 19). Here we have the foreshadowing of an assembly prayer meeting with the smallest possible number of participants—two.

In Acts 4, with the Church now in existence, we read of a very impressive assembly prayer meeting. The apostles Peter and John, upon being released from prison, “went to their own company” (verse 23). After the assembly heard Peter and John’s report, “they lifted up their voice to God with one accord” (verse 24). (Note the similarity with Matt. 18:19.) Observe what they prayed for: not for protection from trials and persecution; not for judgment to come upon the persecutors; but for boldness to speak God’s Word in the midst of a hostile world (verse 29). How quickly and powerfully was that united, assembly prayer answered: “When they had prayed, the place was shaken where they were assembled [or gathered] together [*sunegmenoi*]; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the Word of God with boldness” (verse 31).

Another wonderful example of an assembly prayer meeting is found in Acts 12. We know the story well of how Peter, upon being released from prison, went to the very place where the assembly was gathered in prayer for him (verses 5,12).

Surely there is great power in assembly prayer! It is sad to see how little value is placed on the assembly prayer meeting in so many local churches and assemblies today. Sometimes just a small fraction of the assembly is present at such meetings. Where are you—my reader friend—to be found at the time of the weekly prayer meeting? Do you realize that Christ is there in the midst just as in the remembrance meeting? The One in whose name we pray (John 14:13,14; 15:16; 16:23), who prays for us (John 17:9) and makes intercession for us (Heb. 7:25), and the all-powerful, all-wise “I AM” who can meet all of our needs, is in our very midst when we are thus gathered. An assembly can surely expect immense blessing and experience the power of God when all the saints of the assembly are regularly gathered together around *the Lord* in prayer.

**The Meeting for Assembly Discipline.** While the immediate context of Matt. 18:20 is a prayer meeting, the broader context is a meeting for discipline: “If your brother will trespass against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone.... Take with you one or two more.... Tell it unto the church.... Whatsoever you will bind on earth will be bound in heaven; and whatsoever you will loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (verses 15-18). The apostle Paul gives instruction concerning an assembly meeting for discipline: “In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together [*sunegmenoi*], and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, to deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus” (1 Cor. 5:4,5). Putting people out and receiving people into

fellowship is not the work of a clergyman, not the work of a body of elders or deacons, but the work of the assembly as a whole, as “gathered together” “in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” The great value and power of assembly discipline and other assembly decisions derives from being gathered around *the Lord* who guides their decisions and ratifies them in heaven (Matt. 18:18).

**The Open Ministry Meeting.** “Being assembled together with them, [Jesus] commanded them that they should not depart from Jerusalem, but wait for the promise of the Father.” Jesus went on to tell His disciples, “You will receive power, after that the Holy Spirit is come upon you; and you will be witnesses unto Me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth” (Acts 1:4-8). The literal sense of verse 4 is that Jesus had the disciples gathered together about Himself. In this way, in their midst, He encouraged and instructed His disciples. This might be considered to be a precursor to an open ministry meeting where the assembly is gathered together around the Lord Jesus to receive ministry from Himself through the mouths of His prophet-servants.

The apostle Paul, in describing the ministry particularly prominent in the open ministry meeting, wrote, “He who prophesies speaks unto men to edification, and exhortation, and comfort” (1 Cor. 14:3). When an assembly is gathered together unto the name of the Lord Jesus Christ for receiving ministry, there is the promise that the Lord Himself will be there in the midst, speaking through mouths of willing, devoted brothers, words of “edification, and exhortation, and comfort.”

Instruction concerning the open ministry meeting is found in 1 Corinthians 14. “When you come together, every one of you has a psalm, has a doctrine, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying” (verse 26). This verse, when read in the context, serves two opposite purposes. First, on the positive side, it describes the character of the open ministry meeting, with many believers taking part in different ways. Second, on the negative side, it suggests that there was disorder in Corinth with this meeting as there was with the Lord’s Supper. The words, “every one of you,” along with the corrective instructions that follow, show that *everybody* was trying to get into the act at such a meeting, and it was resulting in confusion. For this reason, the apostle Paul was led by the Holy Spirit to write down several rules, such as limiting the number of speakers to “two or three,” to help bring order to these meetings (verses 27-35).

**Other Kinds of Meetings.** Other meetings of the believers are mentioned in the New Testament. For example, we read of the apostles preaching and teaching the Word of God to the believers (Acts 2:42; 20:7) as well as preaching the gospel to a mixed company of believers and unbelievers (Acts 2:14-26). These have a somewhat different character from the meetings mentioned above in which the believers were gathered around Christ, totally depending upon the Holy Spirit to lead one or another brother in praying, worshiping, reading or ministering the Scriptures, or giving out a hymn. Spiritual gifts, such as the gift of an evangelist, pastor, or teacher, may be more prominent in these other kinds of meetings such as preaching meetings, Bible readings, or gospel meetings. The Holy Spirit does not require any particular gift when leading a brother to pray, praise, or minister the Scriptures in an assembly remembrance meeting, prayer meeting, or open ministry meeting.

**Frequency of Gatherings for the Lord’s Supper.** As mentioned above, the believers initially had the “breaking of bread” daily (Acts 2:42) and later weekly (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2).

The children of Israel in the Old Testament were to offer a lamb every morning and a lamb every evening as a continual burnt offering (Exod. 29:38-42). On the Sabbath (the seventh day), this number was to be doubled. The sacrificed lambs prefigured the sacrificial death of Christ on the cross for our sins. That which was a picture of the atoning death of Christ was to be continually kept before the minds of the Israelites. So it is not surprising that God would want believers in Christ to have the remembrance of His death frequently before them. “For as *often* as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you show the Lord’s death till He come” (1 Cor. 11:26).

No specific command has been given as to how often is “often.” However, this is the only kind of gathering the Lord has specifically requested of the believers, so it surely should be given the highest priority in the local assembly, above teaching, preaching, Bible study, and even prayer.

We sometimes hear objections to weekly observance of the Lord’s Supper: “If we do it too frequently, it will become stale, commonplace, boring.” But isn’t it curious that we seldom hear that objection to eating meals? And the people who spend about 600 hours each year listening to or watching baseball games or watching TV soap operas, apparently do not find them stale, trite, and boring. On the other hand, how could we

possibly be bored when the Lord Jesus Christ is in our midst! Is heaven going to become stale, commonplace, and boring after a few weeks or months or years or millennia? Impossible!!!

Here are some suggested reasons why the Holy Spirit has told us to remember the Lord *often* (1 Cor. 11:26):

a. God the Father and Christ our Saviour surely are worthy of the continual, repeated, collective praise and worship of saints who have been redeemed by the precious blood of Christ. This will be the eternal theme of the saints in heaven (Rev. 5:8-14). Why should it not occupy a large place in the believers' lives here on earth? "Unto Him be glory *in the Church* by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen" (Eph. 3:21).

b. Each time we do this we enter, by faith, into the holiest where Christ has preceded us (Heb. 9:11,12,24; 10:19-22). As we do so we are reminded of the need to examine ourselves and judge the sin in our lives (1 Cor. 11:28-30), to be living holy lives day by day throughout the week (1 Cor. 5:8), and to be keeping short accounts with God and with our brothers and sisters in Christ (Matt. 5:23,24).

c. As we physically feed upon the bread and wine, we spiritually feed upon Christ, being nourished by the Holy Spirit with fresh thoughts of the perfections, glories, sufferings, and love of Christ, all of which provide fresh motivation for loving Him in return and for living godly, obedient, dependent lives throughout the coming week.

d. We are prone to forget. "Keep your soul diligently, lest you forget" (Deut. 4:9).

#### **Summary and Conclusion.**

a. God wants all believers in Christ to be gathered with other believers in the local church or assembly, and not just stay at home listening to "electronic" preachers and Bible teachers. "Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together" (Heb. 10:25).

b. God has designed special meetings of the assembly in which the gathered believers, in full dependence upon the leading of the Holy Spirit, enjoy the presence of the Lord Jesus in their midst (Matt. 18:20).

c. In following sections, we will speak more of how such meetings may be conducted as well as of other ways each individual member of the body of Christ may contribute to the welfare of the whole.

## **7. Characteristics of the Early Church: The Priesthood of All Believers**

In Old Testament times Jehovah established a priesthood in the nation of Israel. The work of the priest was "to offer gifts and sacrifices" (Heb. 8:3), "first for his own sins, and then for the people's" (Heb. 7:27). Jehovah selected a special family out of all the tribes and families of the nation to serve as priests on behalf of the entire nation. Woe to anyone from outside the family of Aaron who attempted to usurp the priesthood for himself (Num. 16:17).

The teaching of the New Testament concerning priesthood represents quite a change from that of the Old Testament, however. The priesthood of Aaron and his family has been replaced by the priesthood of Christ and His body. The Israelite priesthood, under law, was characterized by distance from God, while the Christian priesthood, under grace, is characterized by nearness to God. Only the *high priest* could go into the inner sanctum or "holiest of all" of the tabernacle—the very presence of Jehovah. He could do this only once a year, and only with the blood of a goat to make atonement for his own sins and those of the people (Lev. 16:2,15-17,29,30; Heb. 9:1-10). But when Christ died, the veil of the temple that blocked the way into the holiest "was torn in two from the top to the bottom" (Matt. 27:51). For this reason, we are told that believers in Christ have "boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way, which He has consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, His flesh" (Heb. 10:19,20).

**Who is Our High Priest Now?** It is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself who is a "merciful and faithful High Priest" (Heb. 2:17). He is our "great High Priest" who can "be touched with the feeling of our infirmities ... in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:14,15). He is a "holy, harmless, undefiled" High Priest who is "separate from sinners and made higher than the heavens ... set on the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens" (Heb. 7:26; 8:1). He is the One who offered one perfect sacrifice—Himself!—that

fully satisfied a holy God, in contrast to the repeated animal sacrifices offered by the priests of Israel (Heb. 7:27; 9:9,12,14; 10:11-14). The Book of Hebrews clearly proves the superiority of the priesthood of Christ over that of Aaron.

**Who Are the Under-Priests Now?** If Christ is the High Priest, are there under-priests as well? Yes indeed! But these are not confined to one particular family or specially-appointed class of believers. Whenever the Christian priesthood is mentioned it clearly has reference to *all* believers, *every* member of the body of Christ: “You also, as living stones, are built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood,... a royal priesthood” (1 Pet. 2:5,9) To whom was the apostle Peter writing? “To the strangers scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through sanctification of the Spirit,... begotten ... unto a living hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Pet. 1:1-3). This epistle was not written to a special class of believers but to *all* believers, including Christian servants (2:18), wives (3:1-6), husbands (3:7), ministers of the Word (4:11), elders of the local assembly (5:1-4), and younger believers (5:5). In the Book of Revelation, those whom Christ has made “priests unto God” are the same ones whom He loved and washed from their sins (1:5,6).

**What Does a Christian Priest Do?** Christian priests are the spokesmen *of* God (by prophesying) to the assembly and the spokesmen *to* God (in prayer) from the assembly. What do we do when we enter into the holiest and thus draw near to Christ (Heb. 10:19,20)? We surely do not come near *with* the blood of a sacrifice as Aaron used to do on the great day of atonement. Rather, we come “*by* the blood of Jesus” (10:19), the blood of a far superior sacrifice shed at the cross of Calvary. As we draw near we “offer up spiritual sacrifices” (1 Pet. 2:5), “the sacrifice of praise to God” (Heb. 13:15). Surely each believer in Christ has the privilege of doing this in his/her own private meditations and devotions. We can enjoy a nearness to God through Christ that was not possible for the family of Aaron.

But notice that the drawing near into the holiest is linked in Hebrews 10 with “not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together.” So there is also a collective aspect to this—a drawing near to Christ in fellowship and company with other believers in Christ. The highest possible expression of this drawing near to Christ in a collective way is the observance of the Lord’s Supper. We gather together unto the name of Christ, with Himself in our midst (Matt. 18:20), with Himself and His atoning death the object of our meditations, praise, and worship (1 Cor. 11:24-26), with Himself as our High Priest (Heb. 2:17; etc.), and Himself as our Praise-Leader (Psa. 22:22; 40:3; Heb. 2:12).

Many Christian denominations and congregations today, while giving lip-service to the truth of the priesthood of all believers, behave as if God’s order for the Church is the same as was His order for the nation of Israel. They believe that persons specially appointed as priests or clergymen are necessary to minister to the rest of the congregation—the laity—and to represent them before God.

Does the New Testament speak of a special class of believers with greater authority and privilege than the rest to draw near to God with their praise and worship? Nowhere! In fact, to establish such a class implies that other worshipers cannot directly approach God with their gifts and sacrifices. They are kept at a distance while others approach for them.

In 1 Corinthians 11 and 14 we find instruction given to believers as to their conduct when they come together. In chapter 11 the Corinthians were enjoined not to allow the holy observance of the Lord’s Supper to be marred by divisions and class-conscious cliques among them (11:17-34). In chapter 14 they were told, “When you come together, *every one* of you has a psalm, has a doctrine, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying” (14:26). The apostle goes on to set upper limits on the number of speakers and to order that the “women keep silence in the churches, for it is not permitted unto them to speak” (14:27-34). In all of the instructions given as to the conduct of the believers when they come together in gatherings of the local church or assembly, there is not the slightest hint of a single person ordained or assigned to lead the assembly in its worship. Rather, all indications point to *many* of the brothers participating in such a meeting. And is this not in keeping with the truths we have already noticed in Hebrews, 1 Peter, and Revelation that *Christ* is our High Priest and Praise-Leader, and that *all* believers comprise the Christian priesthood?

In case any of our readers has never experienced it in person, let me try to paint a picture of an assembly of Christian priests gathered with their High Priest to observe the Lord’s Supper. As led by the Holy Spirit (and

not by taking turns or by prearranged agreement), several brothers may in turn give out specific hymns to be sung by the congregation, and intermingled with these hymns may be prayers of thanksgiving and praise (perhaps as simple as, “We thank Thee, Lord, for dying on the cross for us; amen”) and meditation on the sufferings of Christ. One or two brothers, again as moved by the Holy Spirit, may stand up and read passages of Scripture, with or without comment, that help to focus the hearts of the congregation on the beauties and glories of the person of Christ and on the agonies and sufferings of His death on the cross for us. Sometime during this service a brother will be moved by the Holy Spirit to get up and give thanks for the loaf of bread and the cup of wine, symbols of the body and blood of Christ, and will pass the loaf and the cup to those who are in fellowship, that is, identified with the assembly. The brother who does this may pray with great eloquence or with stammering lips; may be 101 or 61 or 21 years old; may have been in fellowship for eight decades or eight weeks; may be a millionaire or a pauper; may have a Ph.D. or be a third-grade dropout; may be of any race or ethnic background. Where each one in the assembly is humbly waiting on the Holy Spirit for guidance, this gathering of priests can be a most wonderful, awesome experience of united, harmonious praise and worship.

One may ask, “If any one is allowed to participate, are not mistakes sometimes made?” Yes, to be sure. Occasionally, hymns may be given out or prayers uttered or Scriptures read that have little or nothing to do with commemorating the sufferings and death of Christ. Sometimes a brother may participate when not led by the Holy Spirit, but rather, perhaps, by a sense of his own importance and for the purpose of putting himself forward, or perhaps through a lack of understanding. But the Lord knows all about our weaknesses and failures and bears with us and overlooks a great deal in us. Would we, because of occasional weakness and failure, give up a meeting where each male priest is free to participate, as led by the Holy Spirit, for one where only one priest is given the privilege and authority to speak, regardless of whether he is actually led by the Holy Spirit?

**What About the Female Priests?** The picture we have just painted—and which is acted out in thousands of local assemblies around the world each Lord’s day—seems to include only the male priests, the brothers in Christ. What about the female priests, the sisters in Christ? Do they have any role to play other than as spectators?

Yes, they have a most vital role to play! First of all, they have the privilege of drawing near, within the holiest, in their private meditations and devotions. In this their privilege is identical to that of the brothers. Second, in meetings of the assembly where “it is not permitted unto them to speak” (1 Cor. 14:34), they often provide a solid spiritual foundation for the meeting. I know (from my personal experience) that there is a tendency for the brothers sometimes to be occupied with what they should say so as to make the best impression on others, whereas the sisters are free to give themselves to pure meditation upon the Lord without worrying what others will think. And so, I suspect, the Lord may often take much more pleasure in the inaudible praises of the sisters than the audible ones of the brothers.

Several times I have had the experience of a sister coming to me after a meeting and saying that a thought I had expressed, or a Scripture passage I had read, or a hymn I had given out was exactly what was going through her mind at that very moment. Experiences like this serve to solidify the bonds that unite the saints together in an assembly. Also, in many cases a married brother will receive spiritual insights through conversations with his wife during the week, and the Holy Spirit may lead him to express such thoughts in a meeting of the assembly.

Some may ask why, if *all* Christians are part of the priesthood, only the *brothers* are allowed by God to engage in priestly activities in a public way. I don’t profess to know the entire answer to that. The Lord will reveal it in the glory, I am certain. But I believe it is related to the teachings of Scripture that “Adam was first formed, then Eve” (1 Tim. 2:11-13), “the head of the woman is the man” (1 Cor. 11:3-10), and “the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the Church” (Eph. 5:22-24). The sisters’ silence in the meeting may serve as a “mute testimony” to the truth that Christ is Head of the Church, and thus the brothers as representing Christ in this setting must be most careful that whatever they say in the meeting does not come from themselves, for their own glory, but is truly from Christ, truly “the oracles of God ... that God in all things may be glorified through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 4:11).

Some sisters in this era of feminism may tend to be resentful that God has ordered them not to take a public part in the assembly meetings. They may resent it that the brothers get all the glory and honor of the public place. But this misses the whole point. Neither sisters nor brothers are to be seeking personal honor and

glory, either in this world or in the one to come. It is *God* who is to be glorified through *Jesus Christ* as we just noticed in the previous paragraph, and as we find emphasized throughout the Scriptures (for example, Josh. 7:19; 1 Chron. 16:10,24,27-29; Psa. 22:23; 50:1; Mal. 2:2; Matt. 6:13; Luke 2:14; Rom. 15:6,9; 1 Cor. 6:20; Rev. 1:6; 5:12,13; and numerous of other references). Those who receive glory and honor for themselves in this present life cannot expect further reward in the next life (Psa. 49:18-20; Matt. 6:1-6). Beloved brothers and sisters in Christ, may we earnestly desire that *all* glory and honor and praise go up to God, and not seek one iota of it for ourselves. I truly believe that when the rewards and crowns are given out at the judgment seat of Christ, it will be the sisters who worshiped and served the Lord quietly, in the private sphere given to them by the Lord, who will carry away the most and best rewards.

**Silent Priests.** While the sisters are *not permitted* by God to exercise their priesthood in public meetings of the assembly, there are many brothers who *fail* to exercise their God-given rights and privileges in this regard. Why is this? For some it may be that they just are not enjoying a close walk with the Lord; perhaps they are allowing their job and hobbies and home improvement activities to crowd out their “quiet time,” time they should be spending daily reading the Word, meditating on it, praying, and worshiping. If this is the case, their cup of praise will not be “full and running over” on the Lord’s day. It is what we gather through the week from the Word that will form our thoughts for expression at the Lord’s Supper. Further, our preparation is greatly enhanced by our being punctual, being seated at least a few minutes before the scheduled time of the meeting (Luke 22:14).

For others, I believe, the reason is self-consciousness, which is a polite word for pride. Many are afraid that if they speak up in the meeting they may stumble or stutter or say the wrong thing or be rebuked by another. That certainly may happen. Join the crowd! By remaining silent when the Lord, the Praise-Leader, has given you something to contribute, you may preserve your own self-glory and protect your self-image from the slightest tarnish, but at the same time you take away from God’s glory by failing to give Him the glory that He deserves.

Has anyone ever thrown a birthday party for you? I’m sure most of us can answer in the affirmative. When you open your gifts, what do you say? Do you remain silent because you are afraid that you might not be able to say “Thank you” with just the right inflection, or with an appropriate degree of enthusiasm? Or do you say, “I just don’t have a gift for saying ‘Thank you’”? I have never yet met a person who wasn’t able to say a simple, “Thank you,” when receiving a gift. Why, then, is it so difficult to say aloud in a group of fellow-believers gathered around the Lord, “Thank You, Lord, for dying for us; amen”?

May the Lord encourage each male priest to take advantage of his privilege of bringing glory and honor to God by allowing the Holy Spirit to lead him to participate in the assembly praise and prayer meetings. May the Lord encourage each of us, brothers and sisters alike, to draw near to Him frequently, within the holiest, with our prayers, praises, and meditations, “the fruit of our lips giving thanks to His name.”

## **8. Characteristics of the Early Church: Ministry in the House of God**

“The House of God ... is the pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15).

Members of the body of Christ today are used to the idea of a clergy-laity distinction or of a one-man or few-man ministry in the local church. Is this how it was in the early Church? What do we learn about ministry of God’s Word in the Church as described in the New Testament?

In Section 7, we noted the teaching of the New Testament of the priesthood of *all* believers, rather than one man in each local assembly leading the worship on behalf of the entire congregation. Just so, the New Testament stresses the fact that *all* believers have received spiritual gifts and *all* have a ministry to carry out in conjunction with the body of Christ. The following Scriptures bear this out:

“I say ... to every man that is among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, according as God has dealt to *every* man the measure of faith. For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether

prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith....” (Rom. 12:3-8).

“The manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal. For to one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom; to another the word of knowledge by the same Spirit.... All these works that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to *every* man severally as He will” (1 Cor. 12:7-11).

“And He gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:11,12).

These passages show clearly that *every* believer in Christ has received a spiritual gift. The next verses show that *every* believer has a responsible role to play in the assembly:

“The body is not one member but many.... If the ear will say, Because I am not the eye, I am not of the body, is it therefore not of the body? If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? ... But now has God set the members every one of them in the body, as it has pleased Him. And if they were all one member, where were the body? But now are they many members, yet but one body” (1 Cor. 12:14-20).

Those with positions of oversight and leadership in a local assembly are warned in Scripture not to lord it over God’s people: “The elders who are among you I exhort,... Feed the flock of God that is among you, taking the oversight thereof; not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; neither as being lords over God’s heritage, but being examples to the flock” (1 Pet. 5:1-3). “Lords over God’s heritage” is a very interesting expression given subsequent developments in the history of the Church. The Greek word for “heritage” is *kleros*, which basically means “lot” or “inheritance.” The words “clergy” and “cleric” are derived from this Greek word. Thus, the only reference to “clergy” in the New Testament applies this word to the flock of believers as a whole, and not to the leaders.

An early abuse of leadership in the Church is discussed in 3 John 9-10: “I wrote unto the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to have the preeminence among them, receives us not ... neither does he himself receive the brethren, and forbids those who would, and casts them out of the church.”

In Section 6 we discussed a type of assembly meeting called the open ministry meeting, described in 1 Corinthians 14. Here is a meeting where every brother in the assembly is free, as led by the Holy Spirit, to minister the Word of God for “edification, and exhortation, and comfort” (1 Cor. 14:3).

While elders, overseers (or bishops), and deacons were appointed in each local assembly in New Testament times (these will be discussed more completely in the Section 9), there is no hint in the New Testament of one man appointed to be the priest, pastor, or clergyman of a local assembly.

Who was appointed to be the pastor of the 3,000 souls that made up the infant church at Jerusalem following the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:41)? All 12 of the apostles were part of that company; their teaching and their wonders and signs were prominent. But there is no evidence of one being more prominent than another.

How about the assembly at Antioch? Barnabas and Paul spent a year in Antioch establishing the new assembly there in the Word of God (Acts 11:19-26). Paul and Barnabas, neither separately nor together, established themselves as pastors of the church at Antioch. Rather, they spent their time helping the new believers to grow in their knowledge of God’s Word and to develop their own spiritual gifts. After a year, we read, “There were in the church that was at Antioch certain prophets and teachers, as Barnabas and Simeon ... and Lucius ... and Manaen ... and Saul.” There were now several gifted and devoted brothers in the Antioch assembly. They were all leaders by virtue of their gift and devotion to the Lord, but there is no indication of any one of them being the pastor or president of the assembly.

In the apostle Paul’s several epistles, he either greets or sends greetings from many named fellow believers. He speaks often of his “fellow laborers” and his “fellow prisoners” (for example, Philem. 23,24). He typically addresses his epistles to “the saints,” “the church,” or “the brethren.” The apostle never once singles out one pastor or leader of a particular local assembly in his letters to the churches.

It is not simply the author’s opinion that the New Testament teaches nothing about a system of clergy and laity in the Church. The following quotation is from the *Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* edited by Professor Philip Schaff of Union Theological Seminary along with “Reverends” Samuel Jackson and D. S. Schaff: “It may be considered settled that there is no order of clergy, in the modern sense of the term, in the New Testament; that is, there is no class of men mentioned to whom spiritual functions exclusively belonged. Every believer is a priest unto God. Every believer has as much right as anybody else to



pray, to preach, to baptize, to administer communion (Rom. 5:2; Eph. 2:19-22; 3:12; 1 Pet. 2:9; 1 John 2:27; Rev. 1:6; 5:10, etc.).... Baptism, the Lord's Supper, preaching, and prayer—like singing, taking up a collection, reading of the Scriptures, and reading of notices—may be performed by laymen with precisely the same spiritual effect as if the highest or the most godly minister in the land had been the administrator.... Although, in the New Testament, there is no clergy in the modern sense of the term, very early in Church history do we find the distinction between clergy and laity," etc.

If not ordered by Scripture, how and why did such a clergy-laity distinction develop. Schaff explains: "It does not follow [from not being found in the New Testament] that therefore the clergy are superfluous. Experience has shown that certain persons are by natural endowment better fitted for spiritual functions than others, and also that, in the Christian communities, there will be leaders to whom will gravitate the major part of the work. The clerical order took its rise, therefore, in the very necessity of the case. Decency, order, and efficiency demanded that certain persons should make it their business to conduct the services, and have the oversight, of the congregations."

Notice the human reasoning in the preceding paragraph that seeks to justify that which has no foundation in the New Testament. And what has been the outcome of such a human arrangement? In large measure there has been a stifling of the development and manifestation of spiritual gifts by the believers in congregations having a one-man or few-men ministry. The following personal anecdote is one of many that could illustrate the point: A long-time friend of mine went to seminary and became pastor of an independent Bible church. Having had some familiarity with assemblies that did not have ordained pastors, he sought to encourage his congregation to develop and use their spiritual gifts in preaching and other ministries in the local church. Because of their long history of being dependent upon the ministry of one man, my friend's efforts ended in utter failure.

Coming to present-day practices, what if the appointed pastor of a local church is gifted as an evangelist but not as a teacher? or what if he is gifted as a teacher but not as an evangelist? The following are excerpts of two letters written to a Christian magazine a few years ago:

a. "When we moved two years ago, my family and I joined a new church. After a year I realized I wasn't growing spiritually. The pastor's sermons are always the same: salvation. That alone is wonderful, but he never preaches on anything else, morning and evening."

b. "My church is not evangelistic. When a few of us talked with our pastor about reaching out to the community, he answered, 'Evangelism is just not my gift.'"

I have heard and read many times about the frustrations expressed by pastors who are expected to have every spiritual gift and to carry out every possible function of an assembly. To illustrate this, here, from another Christian magazine, is a job description for an ideal pastor: "Jack-of-all-trades. Must be strong preacher—deep yet clear—and simple teacher, capable of instructing adults and children. Expert counselor; warm, outgoing personality for visiting newcomers and members of church family; adept at comforting sick, bereaved and elderly. Emcee with great sense of humor for social events. Top-notch administrator. Pastor or wife must be gifted secretary; budget does not allow for one. Wife must be able to play piano (or at least guitar); children should also possess musical talent. Must be content with salary we are willing to offer." This was written "tongue in cheek" to illustrate what, too often, are the unrealistic expectations of a congregation that is seeking a pastor.

The irony and tragedy of these situations is that while a pastoral search committee is putting advertisements in papers all over the country, devoted believers possessing a whole range of spiritual gifts often are already present in that same church.

A properly functioning assembly according to the Scriptures is one in which *all* the members are assuming their God-given role and serving and ministering by means of their Spirit-imparted gift. In an assembly where leadership is granted to the Holy Spirit alone, there is liberty for all of the gifts to be manifested in appropriate, Spirit-directed balance. In the assembly Bible studies there is liberty for those gifted in knowledge and teaching to bring out the doctrinal aspects of the passage, and those gifted in wisdom, shepherding, and exhorting to point out the practical applications to people's lives. Those with other gifts are likewise free to share lessons from the passage that may have impressed them and that others with different gifts, different sensitivities, may have failed to notice. This liberty is not thwarted but is often enhanced in

instances where a brother may take the responsibility to open the discussion, keep bringing it back on the track of the particular passage or topic under study, keep the group from bogging down on one verse or part of a verse, and draw out the participation of others by asking various questions concerning the passage or topic.

In a local assembly, regular meetings may be announced for different brothers in the assembly to give lectures on various Scriptural topics. These may include lectures on doctrines of Scripture, practical applications of Scripture and exhortations, meditations on the Person and work of Christ, presentation of the gospel of salvation, etc., according as the Lord may lead the brother.

Other typical activities and duties usually relegated to the so-called “pastor” or “chief elder” of a local church, such as visiting the sick, exhorting backsliders, baptizing converts, conducting weddings and funerals, and so forth, may likewise be carried out by different ones in the assembly who, by virtue of spiritual gift and desire to be of service to the Lord, will take responsibility to see that these needful activities are carried out.

If any reader would like to learn more about gatherings of believers that do not have clergy-laity distinctions, and where they might find such a gathering in their locale, please write to the publisher.

Finally, let those assemblies that practice a “many-man ministry” rather than a “one-man ministry” beware of falling into one of two extremes:

a. Let no brother become a controller like Diotrephes (3 John 9,10). I have known assemblies where, *in principle*, there was renunciation of the clergy-laity system, but *in practice*, one man had arrogated to himself almost absolute control over the assembly. No decision could be made by the assembly unless *he* agreed with it. Any teaching in a Bible study that he did not agree with was summarily denounced. This is the spirit of Diotrephes.

b. Let us not so neglect our spiritual gift (1 Tim. 4:14) and our responsibilities in the local assembly that other, less qualified but more devoted persons, are compelled to do the work that could better be done by ourselves.

This section began with a quotation from 1 Timothy 3:15. The House of God will not succeed as “pillar and ground of the truth” when only one person, or even a small subset of the local assembly, has total responsibility for ministry of God’s Word. (See Section 4 for more on the meaning of “pillar and ground.”) It is when the spiritual gifts of *all* the believers are exercised under the control and leading of the Holy Spirit that the House of God will in practical reality be the pillar and ground of the truth.

## **9. Characteristics of the Early Church: Overseers and Deacons**

**What is the Difference Between Bishops, Overseers, and Elders?** These three terms all apply to the same office in the local church. The apostle Paul called together the “*elders*” of the church at Ephesus (Acts 20:17), and said to them: “Take heed ... to all the flock, over the which the Holy Spirit has made you *overseers*” (20:28). The terms “elders” and “bishops” likewise refer to the same persons: “For this cause I left you in Crete that you should set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain *elders* in every city, as I had appointed you.... For a *bishop* must be blameless, as the steward of God” (Tit. 1:5,7). The Greek word translated “overseer” is the same as the one translated “bishop” in these and other passages. The word “overseer” describes the kind of work these men do in the local church, and the word “elder” describes the level of spiritual maturity required for such work. As we will see later, the office of a deacon is distinct from that of the overseer or elder.

**How Were Overseers and Deacons Appointed in New Testament Times?** The 12 apostles appointed deacons in the church at Jerusalem (Acts 6:3). The apostle Paul and Barnabas appointed “elders in every church” during their missionary journey (Acts 14:23). Paul authorized his co-worker Titus to appoint “elders in every city” (Tit. 1:5-8); he apparently gave Timothy the same authority to appoint overseers and deacons (1 Tim. 3:1-13). So in the early period of the Church, apostles and apostolic delegates (like Titus and Timothy), under the direction of the Holy Spirit (Acts 20:28), appointed overseers and deacons in the various local churches. We see from these and other passages that each assembly had several overseers and deacons (Acts 11:30; 15:2-23; 21:18; Phil. 1:1; Jas. 5:14).

**What Are the Qualifications of an Overseer?** These are listed in Paul’s letters to Timothy and Titus

(1 Tim. 3:1-13; Tit. 1:5-9). The qualifications include:

a. Moral and spiritual character: “Blameless ... sober, of good behavior, given to hospitality ... not given to wine, no striker, not greedy ... patient, not a brawler ... not covetous ... not self-willed, not soon angry ... just, holy, temperate” (1 Tim. 3:2,3; Tit. 1:6-8).

b. Experience as a leader or ruler: “The husband of one wife ... one who rules well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity ... not a novice” (1 Tim. 3:2,4).

c. Familiarity with the Scriptures: “Apt to teach ... holding fast the faithful Word as he has been taught” (1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:9).

**What Are the Responsibilities of an Overseer?** He takes care of and watches after the souls of the brothers and sisters in a local assembly. “If a man know not how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?” (1 Tim. 3:5) “Obey those who have the rule over you [or, Obey your leaders, JND], and submit yourselves for they watch for your souls as they who must give account” (Heb. 13:17). He exhorts and counsels the believers, warns the unruly, comforts the faint-hearted, and supports the weak (1 Thess. 5:12-14). By sound teaching he exhorts and convinces those who teach things contrary to the Word (1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:9). The overseer may not have a gift for public speaking. There is no indication in the Bible that he is responsible for an assembly’s worship, preaching, teaching, or evangelizing. But he takes time getting to know the brothers and sisters in the assembly. He is hospitable and invites them to his home (1 Tim. 3:2). One on one, as he sees the need, he encourages, comforts, rebukes, corrects, instructs, and warns the believers in the local assembly. What a tremendously important role such a brother has to play in the assembly!

In some Church fellowships the overseers/elders are given the responsibility to receive new believers into their fellowship and to administer assembly discipline—even excommunication—when a brother or sister persists in sinning. However, as noted in Section 6, this is the work of the assembly as a whole and not of a board of elders. The overseers may serve as the “one or two more” who are brought in to establish and verify that a report of a sinning brother or sister is true. But having done so, they are to bring the matter to the entire assembly (Matt. 18:16,17).

**What Are the Responsibilities of a Deacon?** Perhaps the best description of his work is given in Acts 6. There were many poor believers in the church at Jerusalem, often due to persecution by Jews and pagans. The wealthy believers contributed money so that the local church could provide meals and other necessities to the poor among them (Acts 4:34-5:2). It was the deacons who were responsible for handling these funds and making sure that there was no favoritism and that everyone received a fair share.

The Greek word *diakonos*, translated “deacon” in 1 Timothy 3, is used in Acts 6 in reference to the daily **ministration** (of food, verse 1) and to **serving** tables (verse 2).

**Can There Be Overseers and Deacons Today?** This may seem like a strange question. Most local churches today appoint overseers and deacons. However, the Bible does not speak of *churches* appointing people to such offices, but only of *apostles* and *apostolic delegates*, neither of which have existed since the first century. On the other hand, the qualifications of overseers and deacons must have been given in Scripture for a reason.

A number of local churches today believe that Scripture does not give them authority to appoint individuals to the offices of overseer and deacon. However, they recognize the need for persons taking these responsibilities. Those who meet the qualifications and carry out the responsibilities are recognized and encouraged by the local church.

The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians were probably the earliest letters by the apostle Paul included in the Bible. There is no indication that the fledgling assembly at Thessalonica had overseers and deacons. The apostle exhorted the believers there: “Know those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you ... esteem them very highly in love for their work’s sake” (1 Thess. 5:12,13). Even though overseers apparently had not been appointed, there were faithful brothers who were carrying out the work of oversight. The rest of the assembly was responsible to recognize their labors and to heed the advice, counsel, exhortations, and warnings given by these men. A similar thought is expressed in Heb. 13:17: “Obey those who have the rule over you and submit yourselves, for they watch for your souls.”

**How Can One Begin to Carry Out the Work of an Overseer or Deacon if Not Appointed?** The starting point is a life devoted to the Lord—reading, studying, and meditating upon God’s Word, praying

“without ceasing,” serving the Lord, attending the meetings of the local assembly, praying in the prayer meetings, asking questions and commenting on the Scriptures in the Bible studies, and participating in the meetings to remember the Lord. When matters come up in the assembly needing attention—whether getting estimates on a new oil burner for the building or visiting a brother who has not been out to the meeting for two weeks—volunteer to help. If you clearly meet the qualifications, manifest devotion to the Lord, and show a desire to serve in the assembly, I believe that you will increasingly find opportunities and receive requests to help.

There may not be many brothers in a local assembly who meet all of the qualifications of 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. Therefore, those who do should be before the Lord in prayer as to carrying out their responsibilities in the assembly as an overseer or deacon. At the same time, everyone of us in the assembly should expect to find overseers in the assembly coming up to us or inviting us to their homes from time to time and encouraging, exhorting, correcting, or warning us. We must not despise them or resent their intrusion into our personal life. It is for our greatest good and blessing that they do this as they “watch for your souls” in obedience to the Lord (Heb. 13:17). By coming into the fellowship of the local church, we have essentially agreed to be accountable in attitude and conduct to our brothers and sisters in the assembly.

If no overseer or older brother in Christ has *ever* talked to you with the purpose of encouraging, instructing, or correcting you, I suggest you bring this to the attention of one or more of the older brothers in your local assembly. The work of the overseer is to “take care of the church of God” (1 Tim. 3:5).

If you value the work of the overseers and deacons in your local assembly, devote yourself to the Lord and His Word. Make sure you conduct your life in such a way that in due time you will qualify for such a role in the assembly. Most assemblies are in great need of persons who are both qualified and willing to carry out the responsibilities of an overseer or a deacon. Young believers should be encouraged to view themselves as elders/overseers/deacons in training and to conduct their lives with that in mind.

## **10. Characteristics of the Early Church: Church Discipline**

The discipline of sinners has in large measure become a thing of the past in the Christian Church. Under the plea of love, tolerance, and not judging (Matt. 7:1), just about any kind of sin—except the “sin” of intolerance—is permitted in many local churches. However, there are many passages in the New Testament that clearly show God-given authority for discipline in the local church. For example, the apostle Paul passed judgment on the man in Corinth who was committing fornication, and urged the Corinthian Assembly to do the same (1 Cor. 5:3-5). We will now discuss the several different kinds and degrees of discipline described in the New Testament, each designed to deal with a particular kind or degree of sin.

**Dealing with Those Who Have Faults.** “Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in the spirit of meekness” (Gal. 6:1). This particularly falls under the responsibilities of an overseer (see Section 9). However, the person most responsible for going to the erring one and pointing out his/her fault or sin is the one who is aware of the offense.

The Lord might even use a child, like Samuel (1 Sam. 3:11-18), to point out the sin of an older person. A prison inmate serving a life sentence once told me of the time his pre-teen son pleaded with him to stop his life of drugs and crime. He ruefully added that he did not listen to his son, and shortly thereafter a botched burglary ended in his committing a murder.

Why is “a spirit of meekness” required in restoring such a one? And why does it say, “considering yourself, lest you also be tempted”? Meekness is the attitude that receives reproof or insult or injury without defending self and without retaliating or avenging the offense. He who dares to confront one “overtaken in a fault” to “restore such a one” must have a very realistic view of his own past sins and his capability of sinning as much as or more than the one he is seeking to restore. The restorer faces a very real danger: the sinner may resent the intrusion into his business and may begin throwing the past sins of the restorer in his face. If the restorer is not possessed with meekness, he may totally ruin his opportunity to restore his brother by responding to the attack in a defensive or even offensive and sinful way. The ideal response may be, “Yes, you certainly are

right about those sins that I once committed. My life was a mess at one time. But the Lord has restored me to Himself and has blessed me greatly and given me much peace and joy. The reason I have come to you is because I want you to have the joy of your salvation restored to you” (Psa. 51:12).

**Dealing with the Unruly.** “Warn those who are unruly” (1 Thess. 5:14). The “unruly” here are those believers who are neglecting their God-given responsibilities in the home, at work, or in the assembly. It includes those who are not working and are getting into other people’s business instead of trying to find a job, doing volunteer work, helping others, or serving the Lord (2 Thess. 3:11,12).

**Dealing with Heretics.** “A man who is a heretic after the first and second admonition reject [or avoid]” (Tit. 3:10; also Rom. 16:17). A heretic is not necessarily one who teaches wrong doctrine but one who tries to form a party or sect around a particular doctrine or issue or himself. The best way for everyone to deal with such a person is to avoid him as the verse in Titus tells us. Without any followers after his cause, he will either leave and go elsewhere or be quiet.

**Dealing with a Person Who Continues in Sin.** “If your brother sins against you, go, reprove him between you and him alone: if he hear you, you have gained your brother” (Matt. 18:15 JND). This may be either a sin that has been committed personally against you or one that you have witnessed or been told of. So far this is like Gal. 6:1. If your brother confesses his sin and stops doing it, your job is well done and you need not carry the matter further. Or if he gives evidence that he was misunderstood or falsely accused, the matter is over unless new evidence of his wrong-doing comes to light.

“But if he will not hear you, then take with you one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he will neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church; but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto you as an heathen man and a publican” (Matt. 18:16,17). Here is the Scriptural procedure if the sinning brother justifies his sinful deed or continues in his sin. It may not have been a huge sin—like adultery or stealing or being drunk (1 Cor. 5:11)—to begin with. But if it is not confessed, it raises a barrier between himself and the others in the church, as well as between himself and God. If the sin is continued, he is behaving like “a heathen man” and the local assembly has authority from God to put him out of fellowship (Matt. 18:18).

**Dealing with an Elder Who Sins.** “Against an elder receive not an accusation but before two or three witnesses. Those who sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear” (1 Tim. 5:10,20). When an elder or overseer sins, the procedure given in Matt. 18:15-17 does not seem to apply. Because of the responsible position the sinner occupies in the local assembly, his sin calls for public rebuke. At the same time, if his sin is not confirmed by at least two or three witnesses, then the matter should be kept quiet until there is sufficient witness.

**Dealing with a Wicked Person.** “Put away from among yourselves that wicked person” (1 Cor. 5:13). There once was a man in the assembly at Corinth, Greece who was committing fornication. It was not an isolated act but a sin-pattern that was widely known in the community (1 Cor. 5:1). Due to the public nature of this sin, the steps of Matt. 18:15-17 were not applicable. Since the man remained unrepentant, the entire church was to excommunicate him or deny Christian fellowship to him.

Such extreme action is not to be limited to those who commit sexual sins. The apostle Paul writes, “Now I have written unto you not to keep company if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such a one, no, not to eat” (1 Cor. 5:12). Excommunication for false teaching, such as concerning the person and work of Christ, may also be called for if instruction, admonition, and other forms of discipline fail (1 Tim. 1:19,20; 2 Tim. 2:16-21; 2 John 10; compare Gal. 5:9,10 with 1 Cor. 5:6,7).

How does a local assembly go about deciding on and carrying out such discipline? A guideline is given in 1 Corinthians 5: “In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together” (verse 4). This expression “gathered together” is the same in the Greek as that in Matt. 18:20. As noted in Section 6, putting people out and receiving people into fellowship is not the work of a clergyman, nor the work of a body of elders or deacons, but the work of the assembly as a whole, as “gathered together” “in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” The great value and power of assembly discipline and other assembly decisions derives from being gathered around *the Lord* who guides their decisions and ratifies them in heaven (Matt. 18:18).

**Dealing with an Excommunicated Person.** How is the one who is excommunicated to be treated by

others in the assembly? There are two clues given in 1 Corinthians 5: “Deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh” and “with such a one, no, not to eat” (verses 5 and 11). All kinds of social and spiritual fellowship with the wicked person are to be avoided. He/she has behaved like an unsaved person and is to be treated as such, only more severely because of his/her profession of being saved. The sinner is made to experience the poverty of soul and spirit that comes from having no fellowship in things pertaining to God and His Word. (This may be what delivering unto Satan entails.)

There are differing opinions (Scripture does not seem to pronounce on it) as to whether an excommunicated person should even be permitted to sit in on meetings of the local assembly. If such a person does come to meeting, the others in the assembly must be very careful not to engage in social or spiritual fellowship with that person, according to 1 Corinthians 5.

**Restoring an Excommunicated Person.** The purpose of putting wicked brothers or sisters out of fellowship is not to get rid of them. Rather, it is to help them to learn the seriousness of the sin with sincere hope and prayer for their repentance and restoration to the Lord (1 Cor. 5:5; 1 Tim. 1:20). To this end, while there is the avoidance of fellowship with the wicked person, there needs to be continual prayer by the assembly and periodic communication with him/her by one or more brothers in order to ascertain true repentance and restoration to the Lord.

The Corinthian Assembly had to be pushed by the apostle Paul to “put away from among [them]selves that wicked person” (1 Cor. 5:13). When it became evident that the man had sincerely repented of his sin, they again had to be pushed by Paul to “forgive him and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow” and to “confirm [their] love toward him” (2 Cor. 2:6-8).

When the sinner has truly repented of his sin and been restored to the Lord, it is time for the assembly to take action to restore that brother and sister to full fellowship. But how can sincere repentance of one’s sin and true restoration to the Lord be discerned by the assembly? For this I quote another: “Thank God, there is a bright side when, after [the assembly’s] faithfulness in the path of duty, there is the joy of seeing the wanderer restored. We can almost feel the thrill of the apostle’s gladness as he wrote of the recovered brother, ‘I am filled with comfort, I am exceeding joyful in all our tribulation’ (2 Cor. 7:4).

“Restoration is what was prayed for, hoped for, expected. While one put away is to be let alone, this does not preclude the thought of prayer for him, and looking after him after the lapse of some time. Especially should this be done if he appears to be bowing to the Lord’s judgment. Of course, those who put a bold face on it, or who continue in sin, can only be left in God’s hands.

“Marks of true recovery are very plain. There will be a sense of sin against *God* (Psa. 51:4), a judging of the root of it, a submission to God’s governmental dealing, even when the saints may have used undue severity. If there was trespass against any, the wrong will be righted as far as possible—the dishonest gains refunded and the bitter, false accusations withdrawn; also, we need hardly add, the sin will be forsaken. Until there is restoration to communion with God there can be no true restoration to the assembly. The steps in the reinstatement of the cleansed leper (Leviticus 14) to his privileges are instructive in this connection. It was the priest who was to examine the healed man, and the various rites in his restoration are most suggestive of complete recovery.

“It will be noticed that the leper, even after his restoration to the worship of God, ‘remained abroad out of his tent seven days’; it suggests that even after personal recovery an interval may elapse before the person is restored to his privileges in the assembly. There are many reasons for this: if the offense has been glaring or disgraceful, it is fitting that the world should see the genuineness of the repentance. It will not hurt, but deepen in the individual a sense of his sin. In addition to this, it is well to remember that the tender consciences of the saints have been sorely wounded, and the offender will gladly allow time for the healing of the shock inflicted. Anything like insistence upon his immediate reception after confession, or resentment at delay, would show that the work in his soul lacks completeness.

“On the other hand, the assembly needs to guard against a hard, unforgiving spirit. When the consciences of all are satisfied, there should not be needless delay in confirming their love to their recovered brother. ‘Sufficient to such a man is this punishment which was inflicted of many. So that contrariwise you ought rather to forgive him’ (2 Cor. 2:6-8). How gracious, how loving, and yet how holy, are these directions!

“And may we not add that when the restored brother is again in his place, his sin is not to be

remembered? True, *he* will not forget it; but will the others, by look or manner, betray lack of confidence? Ah, we are too much like the world which ‘forgives, but cannot forget.’ Neither can we say such a one must keep silence and never again expect to be used of the Lord. It was Peter, the wandering sheep, who was made a shepherd for others (John 21:15,17). When David was restored he would teach transgressors God’s ways (Psa. 51:13). He will walk softly the rest of his days, a chastened person, but a happy and a useful member of the body of Christ.” (From *The Church and Its Order According to Scripture* by S. Ridout, Loizeaux, Neptune, NJ 07753.)

**Preventive Discipline.** Perhaps some of the problems that call for church discipline might be avoided if more care were taken in receiving brothers and sisters into fellowship in the first place. “Lay hands suddenly on no man” (1 Tim. 5:22) is a verse to consider in this regard.

**Appendix on “Judge Not.”** We have just described several different kinds of judgments to be made by the church against sinners. So what does the verse mean that says, “*Judge not*, that you be not judged” (Matt. 7:1)?

Here are some suggestions as to what we should *not* judge:

a. The context of chapter 6 is earthly riches. The preceding verse says, “Take ... no thought for the morrow” (6:34). The Christian who has (or thinks he has) forsaken all to follow Christ should not stand in judgment on the believer who still is wealthy.

b. We should not judge motives or outward appearances (John 7:24; 1 Cor. 13:7). Rather, we should try to give the most positive interpretation of a person’s action, unless there is clear-cut evidence of sin.

c. We should not judge the service of another Christian (1 Cor. 4:1-4), for example, thinking that *my* service for the Lord is more profitable than *my brother’s* service.

d. We should not judge those who feel free before the Lord to do something we don’t feel right about, nor should the others judge us, provided it is a matter about which Scripture is silent (for example, eating fish on Friday) (Rom. 14:1-5; Col. 2:16).

e. We should not engage in any of the reproving and correcting activities of Matt. 18:15-17, Gal. 6:1, etc., unless we have learned how to accept criticism ourselves and unless we are in a state of self-judgment before the Lord.

## **11. Can We Carry Out the Practices of the New Testament Church Today?**

In the previous sections of this paper we have studied a number of practices of the Church in New Testament times.

a. There was a total unity of local churches or assemblies throughout the Christian world.

b. There was no clergy-laity system or one-man ministry in the local church. The Holy Spirit was the intended leader of the assembly meetings. Under His direction all of the brothers in the assembly were free to participate in worship, prayer, and ministry of the Word. A small number of Christian fellowships today seek to allow the Holy Spirit, rather than an appointed pastor, to be the leader in their assembly meetings.

c. The Lord’s Supper was celebrated daily at first and then on the first day of every week. Weekly remembrance of the Lord in the breaking of bread is observed by some Christian fellowships today.

d. Apostles or their delegates appointed overseers or elders to watch for the souls of the saints in each local assembly. While there is no clear Scriptural basis for appointing such church officials today (in the absence of apostles and their delegates), clearly there is room for those who meet the qualifications (1 Timothy 3) to serve the Lord in this capacity in the local church.

e. Assembly discipline was carried out, warning, rebuking, or even excommunicating persistent evil-doers, and restoring to fellowship those who repented of their evil deeds. Today, a few local assemblies still try to administer church discipline. However, all too many today turn the other way and excuse sinful behavior by saying, “All of us are sinners,” or “We are not to judge others, or “God is a forgiving God.”

**The Fragmentation of the Church.** The practice of the New Testament Church that is by far the most difficult to carry out today is having a unity of assemblies. In the first century, the Church was not only in

principle but also in practice *one body*. No divisions had come in. No separate denominations had been created. However, such divisions were anticipated by the apostle Paul through inspiration by the Holy Spirit when he instructed Timothy as to the possible need of separating or purging oneself from a mixture of the true believers (“vessels of gold and silver”) and the faithless, nominal, superficial, professing Christians (“vessels ... of wood and of earth”), and joining with those who “call on the Lord out of a pure heart” (2 Tim. 2:20-22).

The Church today, in its outward aspect, has been broken into fragments. How we should weep and mourn over the divided state of the Church today! How we should long for a measure of recovery of that unity that originally existed among all of the local assemblies of the body of Christ! And how, even more, we should long for the blessed, eternal day in which there will be **full** recovery of the one body to its pristine, undivided state!

As noted in Section 2, I have heard or read it expressed a number of times: “God has arranged the Church into many different denominations so that each believer may select the one with the kind of pastor, manner of worship, scheme of church government, or variety of activities that best suit his/her needs or personality.” **NOT SO!** By no means is God responsible for the many denominations and divisions of the Church! Sinful man is responsible for them! In my estimation, based on Church history, the following are the most common reasons for divisions in the Church:

a. **Doctrinal error.** The best example of this is the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century. A large number of believers separated from the Roman Catholic Church primarily because they sought to reclaim the Biblical doctrine of salvation by faith alone rather than by works or faith plus works.

b. **Sinful practices.** One of the secondary issues in the Protestant Reformation was the sale of indulgences (deliverance from suffering in purgatory for particular sins) by the priests to the people. Closer to the present time, there have been divisions in Protestant churches over offering pastorates and/or membership to practicing homosexuals or unrepentant adulterers.

c. **Human ego.** Men (and, with growing frequency, women) with the spirit of Diotrephes “who love to have the preeminence” (3 John 9) sometimes break away from a church to start their own congregation.

d. **Differences of views.** Churches and denominations have divided over differences in understanding of various Scriptural doctrines, such as infant versus believer’s baptism, premillennial versus postmillennial coming of Christ, and episcopal (bishops) versus presbyterian (elders) versus congregational forms of church government.

e. **Dissension over church discipline.** All too often, when church discipline is carried out against an unrepentant sinner, there are some who think the discipline is too harsh, others who think it is too lenient, some who think the person has repented, others who disagree, some who continue fellowshiping with the sinner, others who do not, and so forth. Satan loves such situations and has managed to cause assemblies and entire fellowships or denominations to divide over such disagreements.

It is rather ironic that the stronger the emphasis on the authority and divine inspiration of the Scriptures and the supremacy of the Word of God, and on being filled with the knowledge of God’s Word, the greater the likelihood of division. The reason for this is straightforward: two or more gifted teachers, both believing in the supremacy of the Scriptures, and both having invested many years in intense Bible study, become absolutely convinced that their understanding of Scripture is correct. If two teachers or groups of teachers arrive at quite different interpretations of a particular passage or doctrine, both may firmly believe that they are absolutely correct in their understanding. With certain issues, for example, household versus believer’s baptism, the adherents of each view may be able to practice what they believe to be Scriptural without separating from one another. With other issues, such as appointing elders or not, there may not be a way for both parties to be satisfied at the same time. Sadly, the solution often is division.

Are such divisions ordained by God to make it possible for everybody to be “happy”? Again I say, vehemently, **ABSOLUTELY NOT!** But how can they be avoided? By tempering knowledge with a large dose of patience, self-control, and humility. “Fulfill my joy, that you be like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves” (Phil. 2:2,3). “With all lowliness and meekness, and with long-suffering, forbearing one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:2,3). “Giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue, knowledge; and to knowledge, temperance [or self-



control]” (2 Pet. 1:5,6).

Those who excel in knowledge and understanding of the Scriptures, and who sincerely want to be absolutely true to the Scriptures in their teaching and practice, often exhibit an “Achilles’ heel,” a particular area of weakness and failure: they fail to accept that there may be other Christians—particularly those who disagree with them—who have an *equal* (or even *greater*) knowledge of the Scriptures, and are equally devoted to the Lord and equally sincere in wanting to be true to the Word of God in doctrine and practice. There is failure to “esteem other better than themselves.” There is lack of humility. There is pride and ego.

These failures and weaknesses on the parts of gifted, knowledgeable teachers of the Word of God must be recognized and acknowledged. Only then will it be possible for the disagreeing parties to meet together on their knees, praying together, crying out to the Lord to help them to resolve their differences and depending totally upon the Holy Spirit to bring it about; and to discuss together humbly their differences in understanding, each acknowledging the fact that one or both of the parties is wrong and the possibility (as remote as it might seem at the moment) that they themselves might be the ones who are wrong. If this were done with every disagreement among Christians, would there need to be *any* divisions among them?

**What Are We to Do Now?** Given the present fragmented state of the Church, is there any way, in faithfulness to God’s Word, to manifest the truth that “there is one body” (Eph. 4:4)? A number of different ways in which this is being attempted today are now presented.

**a. The open-communion model.** In most denominations of Protestantism liberty is given to members of other denominations to “take communion.” With some it matters not whether a person is a true, born-again child of God. With others the admonition is given to partake only if one is truly saved. And with some the exhortation is given for each potential participant to examine him/herself and judge before God any unconfessed sin before partaking. For the most part, the unity thus existing among members of different denominations is a unity limited to partaking of communion, and generally not extended to the privilege of preaching, teaching, leading the worship, or participating in any decision making as a non-member of that church or denomination. It can be a confusing as well as unholy kind of unity since two branches of a particular denomination (e.g., regular vs. reformed Presbyterians) may recently have separated from one another over fundamental differences of doctrine or practice (e.g., denial of the virgin birth of Christ or ordination of homosexuals), but yet the members of each are free to take communion with the other whenever they wish. Furthermore, there is relatively little church discipline carried out in many of the churches, so that adulterers, drunkards, drug-users, railers, blasphemers, income tax cheaters, etc. who ought to be brought under church discipline are allowed, under the dictates of their individual consciences, to take communion along with those believers who are walking faithfully with the Lord.

**b. The independent or autonomous assembly model.** This is quite similar to the previous model, except that the assemblies in this model exercise more care in reception to fellowship and often carry out church discipline. Under this model, each separate assembly, even within a larger fellowship, is considered to be an autonomous unit, independent of all other assemblies. If a sister is received at Assembly A, she may be refused at Assembly B. Or if a brother is put away from Assembly A because of some kind of wickedness, he may be received by Assembly B. And then things really get confusing when the saints of both assemblies get together at an annual conference and all break bread together. By receiving all individuals who give genuine evidence of being saved, are living moral, upright lives, and not holding fundamentally wrong doctrine (such as denying the deity of Christ), whether they are members of various denominational churches, other assemblies in the same fellowship, or whatever, these assemblies are attempting to show forth the truth that there is one body. However, they do this at the expense of having fellowship at times with those who are themselves associated with unbelievers or with believers who are not upright in walk or sound in doctrine. At stake here is the question of whether the mere association with evil should produce a bar to fellowship. Also, while these assemblies affirm the unity of the body at one level, they deny that unity by virtue of not necessarily recognizing the reception and discipline carried out by other assemblies in their fellowship.

**c. The occasional fellowship model.** Under this model, there is a circle of **interdependent** assemblies, all in fellowship with one another, rather than many mutually **independent** assemblies. A person received at or put away from Assembly A is automatically received at or put away from Assembly B. At the same time, a believer who is a member of, say, a Baptist or Presbyterian congregation, would generally not be permitted to

break bread with the assembly if he/she is doing the same at other times at a church in another denomination or fellowship. However, in order to give at least lip service to the truth that there is one body, and the admission of all true believers in the Church at large, “occasional fellowship” may be practiced. By this, one who may be visiting from out of town for a week or two, who is known to be saved, walking uprightly, and holding right doctrine about fundamental questions, will be allowed to partake of the Lord’s Supper during the visit. In some assemblies this is broadened to include college students while they are away from home, but who return to fellowship at their denominational church when they return home for holidays and the summer months. It is not clear whether this measure of unity extends to allowing the visitors to preach, teach, participate in the worship services, etc. The same problems discussed for the previous model of being linked with evil applies to this model.

**d. The closed communion (or guarded table) model.** With this model the expression of the unity of the body is provided by, but also limited to, having a circle of assemblies, all in mutual fellowship with each other. We are enjoined in 2 Cor. 6:14-18 not to be “unequally yoked together with unbelievers” or “with unrighteousness” and to separate from any such associations. Further, 2 Tim. 2:20,21 teaches separation from a mixture of the pure and impure, that is, from believers who may be morally and doctrinally upright, but linked with either unbelievers or believers who are going on in unjudged moral or doctrinal evil. This is supported by 1 Cor. 5:6,7 and Gal. 5:9, “A little leaven leavens the whole lump.” It is also supported by the Old Testament pictures of leprosy spreading from one person to another unless the leper is put away from the camp (Lev. 13,14), and of one who touches a dead body being unclean for seven days (Num. 19:11). This would seem to preclude the practice of “occasional fellowship.” Also, in contrast with the independent assemblies model, Scriptures given previously (Section 3) concerning letters of commendation would indicate Biblical support for **interdependent** rather than **independent** assemblies.

With this model there may be the superficial appearance of a somewhat more narrow unity and in certain ways a lesser expression of the oneness of the body of Christ than with the previous models. However, in fact, a greater degree of *real* unity is expressed by this model; with the other models, reception to the Lord’s table of one who has been put out of fellowship by another company, or one associated with a heterodox denomination would be an expression of *disunity* and disregard of the company of believers that put away the wicked person or that separated from heterodoxy.

With this model there is a more faithful concern for the holiness of Christ. If assembly discipline is not carried out when called for (1 Cor. 5:13), then each one in the local assembly is linked with the wickedness and Christ, the Head of the body, is also joined with the wickedness. If a person from that assembly visits another assembly and participates in the Lord’s Supper there, then he/she carries that link with wickedness, and unites everyone in the other assembly with it as well. Those in the other assembly may not immediately be aware of the link with wickedness, and may never become actively involved in that wickedness, but as they have fellowship with Christ at the Lord’s table, Christ’s name is linked with the wickedness and *He* certainly is sensitive to that link.

This model is also characterized by a fuller, deeper unity of believers than the preceding models. With open communion or occasional fellowship there may be the outward appearance of a more or less broad unity among the members of the body of Christ. However, that unity may often not extend beyond the sharing of the loaf and the cup. But in the present “guarded table” model, any who may visit from another assembly within the circle are accorded the privilege not only of participating in the Lord’s Supper, but also of preaching, teaching, praying, administering the loaf and cup in the remembrance meeting, and other privileges of those who are in regular fellowship in that local assembly. In other words, the unity that is expressed is more all-encompassing in character.

Instead of giving a visitor the opportunity of a temporary, superficial unity by participating in the Lord’s Supper, it would seem better to work with that individual along the lines of achieving a permanent, fuller, deeper unity. Thus an appeal might be made to the brother, on the basis of 2 Tim. 2:20,21 and 2 Cor. 6:14-20, to purge himself from that mixture of believers and unbelievers, righteous and unrighteous; or else to go back to his home assembly and see if there would be a willingness to study and discuss the Scriptural principles concerning the Church. If his/her local assembly—along with any other local assemblies associated with it—were to begin adhering to the Biblical principles concerning the Church as described in earlier sections, and if

any erroneous doctrines or wicked practices that may have been a cause of division were repented of and resolved, there might eventually develop a basis for full communion between the two groups. This would mean that not only would the visitor from Assembly A now be free to break bread (as well as preach or teach, if so gifted) with Assembly B, but also individuals from Assembly B would be free to visit and enjoy full communion with Assembly A as well.

Having said this, a strong word of caution is in order. The merging of two entire bodies of believers, while the idea seems commendable on first thought, lacks Scriptural authority. Rather, the Scriptures give instruction only for receiving or restoring *individuals* to fellowship (Rom. 14:1; 16:2; Cor. 2:1-11; Col. 4:10; Philem. 12,15,17). When the merging of two bodies of believers has been attempted, it generally results in dropouts from both fellowships and even more divisions. Also, the leaders' eagerness to push the union to completion may often result in failure to inform fully every individual in each fellowship of all of the details of the proposed merger, or to provide adequate time for consideration and discussion by all. Thus, for two separate groups of Christians to come together, it would seem that all of the individuals in one group would have to be received by assemblies in the other group. If this is not feasible, and in the absence of clear Scriptural instruction for effecting such mergers of entire fellowships, it would seem best for God's people to adhere to their primary focus of living day to day and week to week to the glory of God, and to seek to avoid further division by endeavoring, "with all lowliness and meekness, with long-suffering, forbearing one another in love ... to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:2,3).

## 12. Some Final Exhortations and Challenges

In this paper, the author has attempted to show from Scripture how we can come close to patterning the meetings and activities of assemblies of believers after those of the early Church in the New Testament. Due to the tragic divisions that have torn the Church apart over the past 2,000 years, and particularly since the Protestant Reformation, it is not possible to live out the New Testament Church in every detail. But it should be the desire of every blood-bought child of God to come as close as possible to carrying out Christ's plan for His Church.

Many readers of this paper, along with the author, are part of a fellowship in which (a) there is a circle of assemblies (Section 3); (b) there is weekly observance of the Lord's Supper (Section 6); (c) *all* the brothers are allowed and encouraged to participate in every meeting of the local church for worship and ministry (Sections 7 and 8); (d) church discipline is carried out (Section 10); and (e) there is closed communion (Section 11). There may be a tendency among such believers to have a feeling of smugness that *we*—unlike most other believers—are following the order found in Holy Scripture concerning the Church in this day of ruin. This final section is intended to remove any smugness and to challenge our hearts and consciences as to how well we are carrying out in *practice* the Scriptural *principles* concerning the Church.

**The Unity of Assemblies.** If we really believe in the importance of showing forth the unity of the body of Christ, then each of us needs earnestly and prayerfully to seek peace and unity in all matters by showing love, giving up pride, self-assertion, self-ambition—though not giving up fundamental truth or righteousness—for the sake of the unity of the whole. If I disagree with the rest of the assembly on a matter, I must not try to force my opinion (which might make me a heretic), but seek prayerful, non-threatening discussions of the Scriptural principles involved in the matter. The apostle Paul summarizes this point so well: "I ... beseech you that you walk worthy of the vocation wherewith you are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:1-3).

In the case where two or more assemblies in a circle of fellowship are within driving distance of each other, care must be taken not to fall into a "go to the church of your choice" mentality. Suppose a family lives 15 miles north of Assembly A and 25 miles south of Assembly B, both in the same circle of fellowship. With which of the two assemblies should they be identified? Does it matter? Is it suitable to alternate between the two? There does not seem to be a clear Scriptural answer to these questions. However, there is a certain accountability involved in being in fellowship (as implied by there being those who take the oversight in each assembly and by the need sometimes for assembly discipline). Therefore, alternating between two assemblies does not fit in with this accountability. Either Assembly A or B should clearly be the "home" assembly, with the

great majority of one's time spent meeting and working with that assembly. On the other hand, visits to neighboring assemblies or to those far away certainly are not precluded as shown many times in the New Testament (Acts 18:24-28; Rom. 16:1,2; 2 Cor. 3:1).

In the judgment of the author, it would seem to be orderly *in general* for one to be identified with the assembly that is closest geographically (or time-wise). A very practical reason for this is that it enhances one's ability to be present at the assembly meetings and to serve the Lord together with others in that local assembly. There are special considerations that might lead one to make the geographically more distant assembly as his/her "home" assembly. For example, one who lives closer to Assembly A might have a particular spiritual gift that is lacking in Assembly B. On the other hand, if one is having difficulty getting along with his/her brothers and sisters in Assembly A and switches affiliation to Assembly B to escape the problems, this is not a manifestation of keeping "the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." In this author's judgment, any decision to affiliate with the geographically more distant assembly should be done with the complete knowledge, approval, and fellowship of both Assembly A and B. Anything else would seem to be a practical denial of the unity of assemblies.

**The Heavenly Character of the Church.** As brought out in Section 5, the Church as the bride of Christ has a *heavenly* Head and a *heavenly* hope and its members are *heavenly* citizens with *heavenly* blessings. What a challenge is this for each member of the Church! Our heavenly-mindedness (Phil. 3:20; Col. 3:1-4), non-conformance to the world (Rom. 12:2), and living in the constant expectation of the Lord's return (1 Thess. 1:10; 4:13-18) should far exceed that of other groups that do not understand the heavenly character of the Church.

**Gathering Often to Break Bread.** Do we look forward to these occasions, or has it become just a ritual, or even a bother? Do we go there expecting to meet the Lord, preparing by asking ourselves, "What if I were in heaven and called upon to say something to the Lord; what would I say?" Do we prepare our hearts for these meetings by meditating on appropriate Scriptures and hymns? Do you sisters prepare? Do you participate—albeit silently—by praying and meditating?

**The Priesthood of All Believers.** Some assemblies that hold to the truth of the priesthood of all believers *in principle* have lapsed into almost a one-man priesthood by non-participation on the part of most. We live in a spectator society and sadly this has largely carried over into the assembly.

Are you, my reader, a "silent priest"? Does week after week pass by without your uttering a word of praise or thanks in the meeting for remembering the Lord, or without your praying in—or perhaps without even attending—the assembly prayer meeting? If so, I suggest that you re-read the subsection on "Silent Priests" in Section 7. Keep in mind that it does not do much good to follow the *principle* of the priesthood of all believers if you do not act upon it yourself.

**The Responsibility of All Believers for Ministry and Service in the Assembly.** Each of us needs to ask on our knees before the Lord: "What do I do in the body and for the Lord? What is my personal role and responsibility in the local assembly? Once again, while we may accept *in principle* that the system of clergy/laity is unscriptural, do we unwittingly push others in the direction of clergy by our own inactivity and lack of participation in the assembly? Do we place the full-time servants of the Lord who travel among the assemblies on a higher plane than the full-time servants of the Lord with secular employment (which comprise all the rest of the saints)? Do we expect a visiting "traveling brother" to act in all of the capacities of pastor, teacher, evangelist, Sunday School teacher, and worship leader, whatever his particular gift might be? Do we hold back in the remembrance meeting, waiting for the visiting servant of the Lord to give thanks for the loaf and cup? If we are having a problem in our assembly or facing a difficult decision, do we automatically call one or more of the traveling brothers to come and help us, or do we ask the godly brothers of a nearby assembly to assist? At fellowship-wide conferences, do we relax and enjoy ourselves, expecting that the full-time servants will take care of all of the preaching and teaching responsibilities?

Do we excel in our concern for the unsaved? in evangelistic outreach? in active discipling and training of those newly saved? in visitation of the sick, bereaved, aged, shut-in, and imprisoned? in seeking to restore those "overtaken in a fault" (Gal. 6:1)? Or do we only excel in our holding of New Testament *principles* concerning the Church?

**The Existence and Role of Overseers and Guides.** It is commonly taught in many assemblies that we cannot appoint overseers/bishops/elders today since it was only apostles and apostolic delegates who had that authority. Assuming the validity of this teaching, there is yet a crucial need to face up to the fact that it is clearly

God's desire that there should be such overseers in each local assembly. Why else would the qualifications of an overseer be given to us in the Bible (1 Tim. 3, Tit. 1)? Two things are needed in this regard: First, each brother in each local assembly ought to examine himself whether he meets the qualifications of an overseer. If so, he should be very much before the Lord as to carrying out the role and responsibilities of an overseer (as described in Section 9). Further, when qualified brothers *do* take that place in the assembly, the rest of the assembly should be willing to receive any rebuke, reproof, correction, instruction, or warning lovingly and faithfully given to them by the overseer. Individuals in the assembly could go even further and encourage the overseer to feel free to come to them whenever he sensed a slackening of interest or a departure into the world, etc. What a wonderful way of giving practical encouragement to those brothers who lovingly, faithfully, and self-sacrificially do this good and often thankless work.

**Carrying out Church Discipline.** Do we advise those about to be received into fellowship not only of the *privileges* of being in fellowship (particularly, breaking bread), but also of the *responsibilities*, and that they are now subject to reproof, instruction, and warning by those who have the oversight (or others in the assembly), and to assembly discipline if warranted? When receiving children and teens into fellowship, do we find out how they behave at home—such as whether their parents are having severe discipline problems with them? And do we notice how they behave at the assembly meetings—whether they enter into the singing, are attentive to the preaching and teaching, regularly attend all the meetings, or whether they are frequently whispering to their neighbor and showing a general disinterest? Do we parents push our children into asking to be received into fellowship as part of an ego trip for ourselves? Do we consider assembly discipline for active, continual patterns of sin other than fornication or adultery? Do we follow the different Scriptural steps of discipline, or just ignore the problem until it calls for the final, extreme act of excommunication? Do we regularly encourage in one another greater self-discipline and striving for holiness?

Let us not become complacent about following the principles of Scripture concerning the Church. Let us rather seek to be more faithful in carrying out these principles in our local assemblies. Furthermore, let us seek to excel in faithfulness to the Lord and to the Scriptures in *every* area of Christian living.