

THE ASSEMBLY AND ITS GUIDING PRINCIPLES

What is an Assembly?

An assembly is a company of believers (Acts 2:41), gathered unto the name of the Lord Jesus Christ (Matt18:20; 1 Cor 1:1-9, 5:4), who meet regularly in a particular locality according to the pattern found in the New Testament in Acts 2:41,42, and developed fully in such Epistles as 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy. Such an assembly is a spiritual fellowship (1 Cor 10:16,17), which is expressed visibly as they meet for the breaking of bread, prayer, fellowship, the teaching of the Word of God and the preaching of the gospel. They have been gathered together by the Holy Spirit (John 16:13; Rom 8:14), their sole authority is the Word of God (2 Tim 3:16,17), and they have the promise of the Lord Jesus Christ to be in their midst (Matt18:20). They are a residence of the Holy Spirit on earth, so they are a holy temple unto the Lord (1 Cor 3:16,17). Such an assembly is guided by godly brethren in both temporal and spiritual ministry (1 Tim 3:1-16). With Christ as Head and not an individual, the priesthood of all believers is exercised in worship, praise and prayer, and the gifts, given by the risen Head of the church (Eph 4:8-13) have liberty to function under the control of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 14:23-40). Believers are received into the local fellowship not just for breaking of bread but for the privileges afforded them there (Rom 16:1,2) and subject to the discipline of the local assembly, therefore care is taken in reception (1 Tim 5:22, Acts 9:26-18) that they are scripturally sound in life and doctrine. The assembly receives the individual and the individual receives the assembly and the truth it believes and practices (1 Cor 14:23-25). There is a clear line of demarcation between the within and the without of an assembly and purity is maintained by a careful, compassionate, and godly exercise of discipline (1 Cor 5:1-13). Lastly, by definition, the local assembly consist of ALL those in fellowship at the local assembly. Therefore, any decision by the local assembly requires ALL that are gathered there to be consulted and then to agree that the decision is in accord with the Word of God. Such decision cannot be by just a majority gathered there and cannot be determined by the assembly elders. Otherwise, such decision would not be an ***assembly decision*** and would be unscriptural.

Truth & Discipline of the One Body; Circle of Fellowship -vs- Independency

“There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; One Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.” (Eph. 4:4-6). There are different perspectives of the One Body:

Positionally – The standing of the whole body of believers in Christ as seen from God’s point of view constitutes the One Body.

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Practically – Unfortunately, within the church, the truth of the One Body has been eroded due to many divisions. Sadly, only a small number of Christians currently attempt to practice the truth of the One Body.

What does being in fellowship (Greek word is *koinonia*) mean? *Koinonia* means “holding something in common” and is specifically used 20 times in the New Testament (e.g. Phil. 2:1-2, Acts 2:42, 1 John 1:6-7). *Koinonia* describes the unity of the Spirit that comes from Christians’ shared beliefs, convictions, and behaviors. When those shared values are in place, genuine *koinonia* (biblical fellowship) occurs. This fellowship produces mutual cooperation, i.e., a “Circle of Fellowship.”

The truth of the “Circle of Fellowship” is not SECTARIAN. Not seeing this truth can easily result in errors of INDEPENDENCY and OCCASIONAL FELLOWSHIP. When the Apostles wrote to various assemblies, they were all in the same "Circle of Fellowship!" There were no outward divisions and sects yet, so Church ORDER and DISCIPLINE was practiced throughout the assemblies. It is the many divisions today that make it necessary to have a “Guarded Table” and to only break bread with those who are received into the "Circle of Fellowship." Amos 3:3 says, "Can two walk together, except they be agreed?" The obvious answer: They can't! So, in the "collective fellowship" (assembly meetings) one can only have fellowship with (1) those who "see eye to eye" on Church ORDER and DISCIPLINE and (2) with those assemblies that do, therefore constituting a "Circle of Fellowship." This is NOT sectarian, for the claim is not that "only the assemblies within the Circle of Fellowship form the body of Christ and others must formally be in fellowship with such before they could be included in the body of Christ." Rather, the claim is that the assemblies within the Circle of Fellowship are "meeting ON THE GROUND OF THE ONE BODY" and welcome all other believers (for they are "members of the body of Christ") that aren't excluded by Scripture for immorality, false doctrine or association with evil.

One must be under the discipline of a local assembly before he/she can remember the Lord in the breaking of bread. Therefore, one must be received into fellowship in a local assembly before he/she can participate in the various meetings of the local assembly, which includes the breaking of bread. Otherwise, they are "free to come and go at will." If that is the case, how can they be "accountable" to the assembly and how can the local assembly "administer discipline" to them (if they are in need of discipline for immorality, false doctrine, or defiling associations)?

Is it not remarkable that before the church was even born (on the Day of Pentecost) the Lord announced, "...upon this rock I will build my church" (Matthew 16:18)? And is it not equally remarkable that the second mention of the church by our Lord (again, before the church even came into existence) focused on "The responsibility of the local assembly to DISCIPLINE those who were not judging sin in their lives" (Matthew 18:15-20)? This shows the absolute

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importance of DISCIPLINE. Now, if one is "not received into fellowship" it stands to reason they are "not under the jurisdiction of the local assembly"; they are, as stated above, free to come and go as they please. They may frequent a "Baptist church" one Lord's Day and the next week visit a "local assembly of those gathered to the Lord's name alone" and then return the next week to their "Baptist fellowship" (this is the teaching of many in the Open Brethren Chapels). Scripture teaches one should be "in fellowship in a local assembly" and then "CONTINUE steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers" (Acts 2:42). If sin that breaks out in someone that is in fellowship and he/she does not judge that sin, it is the responsibility of the local assembly to "judge that sin." At first it may be a "private rebuke by one" (Matthew 18:15), and if they do not repent it would be a "private rebuke by two or three" (verse 16), and if their sin is not judged at that point, the whole assembly must be brought in to rebuke the sinning saint and "if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as a heathen man and a publican" (verse 17). Or in the words of the Apostle Paul, "Put away from yourselves that wicked person" (1 Corinthians 5:13). And in verse 12 of 1 Corinthians, Paul said, "For what have I to do to judge them also that are without? Do NOT YE JUDGE THEM THAT ARE WITHIN" (verse 12)? This plainly teaches that the local assembly has the RESPONSIBILITY to "judge them who are WITHIN" and has "no jurisdiction over those who are WITHOUT." This means that if believers were allowed to "come and go as they wish," without being received INTO FELLOWSHIP (where they would then be INSIDE and under the assembly's discipline), assemblies receiving such believers would be guilty of disobeying our Lord's words in Matthew 18:15-20 and the Apostle Paul's words in 1st Corinthians 5:1-13.

All value and love Matthew 18:20, "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." We love to think of Him being there when we "remember Him in His death." We love to know that He is with us when we approach the Throne of Grace in our assembly prayer meetings. Matthew 18:17-19 and 1 Corinthians 5:4-5 teaches that it is "Christ in our midst" that gives the AUTHORITY for the local assembly to administer discipline. This means that "an assembly of believers MUST be gathered unto His name" if Christ is going to bless them with His presence and give them the authority to act in discipline. If they are gathered unto His name and have to act in putting one out of fellowship, heaven itself sanctions that act (Matthew 18:18-19). Do the man-made systems of men throughout Christendom "gather unto the name of Christ" and do they then administer discipline as an "act of the whole assembly with Christ in the midst as their AUTHORITY?" The answer to that is clearly NO, they do not. They gather to a MAN (pastor) or they gather to a doctrine (like the BAPTISTS who make the doctrine of BAPTISM their main focus), but they do not even profess to gather to Christ's name alone and own His presence among them as their Divine Leader, along with the Divine leading of the Holy Spirit. And when they do administer discipline, it is normally done by "the pastor" or by a "board of elders," and not by the whole assembly as outlined in Matthew 18:17-20 and 1st Corinthians 5:4-5.

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Finally, and what should be obvious, no one should violate any principle/doctrine of God in order to comply/implement another principle/doctrine of God! To avoid this requires discernment in distinguishing between the positional and practical aspects of the truth of the One Body as interpreted from God's Word, and then applying it appropriately.

GRACE WITHOUT TRUTH IS NOT GRACE!

The Breaking of Bread

The "Breaking of Bread" **IS** only one of several "assembly meetings." Thus, as an assembly meeting, its partakers should be only those in fellowship. The expression "the breaking of bread" is used in the New Testament to refer both to the Lord's Supper and to eating a common meal. The meaning in any particular case must be determined by the sense of the passage. The "breaking of bread" as described in Acts 2:42 obviously refers to the Lord's Supper and **NOT** to a common meal, since it would be quite unnecessary to say that they continued steadfastly eating their meals together. To further confirm this understanding, we learn from Acts 20:7 that the practice of the early Christians was to break bread on the first day of the week. Believing that taking the bread and wine is something that the Lord asked believers to **DO WITH ALL OTHER BELIEVERS IN WHATEVER PLACE THEY HAPPEN TO BE** denies the meanings and principles of fellowship, church discipline, separation from evil, and exposes the sacred and holy event as well as the honor of the one being remembered (the Holy One who knew no sin), and the assemblies and their members, to defilement.

A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump & Association with evil defiles

Some may believe that one is not "linked with and defiled by evil" unless one is personally engaged in immorality or false doctrine and believe that false doctrine from which separation is necessary only concerns false teachings about the Person and/or Work of Christ on the cross (as in the case of giving ear to the Judaizing teachers among the Galatian assemblies who were adding to the finished work of Christ by teaching one must be circumcised). However, "false doctrine" that calls for separation goes beyond one denying Christ's Deity, sinless Humanity, His finished work of atonement on the cross, and faith in His Person and Work, but it would also include false teachings concerning "church order" and "church discipline", for these are a crucial part of the "apostles' doctrine" given to us by the Apostle Paul in 1st

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Corinthians chapters 5, 11, 12 and 14 and in his pastoral epistles as well (1st Timothy and Titus). We see in 2 Timothy 2:16-21 that a false doctrine (that didn't necessarily deny Christ's Person or work on the cross) was being taught by two men and it was being tolerated and not judged by those in the assembly. This prompted Paul to exhort INDIVIDUALS to "purge themselves" from the false teaching which may indeed involve separating from true believers. And once they do separate, they are not left to "go it alone"; they are to "follow righteousness, faith, love, and peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart." This is clearly "separation truth" and not just separation from unbelievers, but separation from all who profess the name of Christ and are not "departing from iniquity." This is necessary because "a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump" (1 Cor. 5:6 and Gal. 5:9)

Principle That Association With Evil Defiles Shown By The Following "Types"

EXOD. 12:1-20 (defilement by partaking of leavened bread resulted in being cut-off)

LEV. 13:1-59 (defilement by contact with leprosy made one unclean)

NUM. 19:1-22 (Red heifer offering for defilement by contact with a dead person made one unclean)

JOSH. 7:1-26 (Achan took spoils from Ai, defiling all the tribes and resulted in God's judgement)

1 KINGS 13:1-32 & 2 KINGS 23:17-18 (The man of God associated with the Old Prophet of Bethel)

DAN. 1:1-21 (Daniel undefiled by refusing to eat Nebuchadnezzar's special food)

HAG. 2:11-13 (One touched by someone who has touched a dead body is also unclean)

2 JOHN 2:10-11 (One who bids God speed to another holding false doctrine is a partaker of his evil deeds)

1 COR. 5:6 (The whole assembly defiled by the incestuous person, i.e., "a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump")

Separation (Sanctification)

Sanctification means to be set apart *from* the world and *to* God. As such, believers are called "Saints." There are different aspects of sanctification:

Positional Sanctification – A believer's *standing* as seen by God through the atoning blood of Christ. Thus, God views us as Saints.

Progressive/Practical Sanctification – A believer's *state* as to his/her behavior and associations. If a believer matures and learns to become more Christlike and to separate from the world's and Christendom's defiling things, his/her *state* will progress

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to become more Christlike. (See parable of the mustard seed describing Christendom in Matt. 13:31-32 and 2 Tim. 2:19-21 instructing believers to purge themselves from unscriptural associations).

“Let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach” (Hebrews 13:13). The immediate interpretation of this verse at the time it was written is about leaving the teachings of Judaism and following Jesus Christ. However, it also has a FUTURE PROGRESSIVE/ PRACTICAL SANCTIFICATION APPLICATION to us living in a day of ruin and division where ELEMENTS OF JUDAISM HAVE BEEN INCORPORATED INTO THE 'CHURCHES' THROUGHOUT CHRISTENDOM. Any professing body of Christians who has a PASTOR/CLERGYMAN and a congregation of people (the LAITY) are patterning themselves after Judaism where God had ordained a "Clergy/Laity system" (with the Levites being the "clergy" and the rest of the tribes being the "laity"). Mr. Darby called the "clergy/laity system" the "sin against the Holy Ghost" for it denies the "leading of the Spirit among us for worship and ministry." Other patterns of Judaism include having a choir, musical instruments, an altar with a bowl of incense and a seven-stemmed candlestick, a pastor wearing a robe (which mimics robes worn by those in the Levitical priesthood). These elements of Judaism deny 1) the Headship of Christ, 2) the leading of the Spirit in our collective gathering unto Christ, and 3) the priesthood of all believers. The "Apostles' doctrine" forbids such things and thus we are called to "...go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach." This is telling us to leave the FALSE DOCTRINE and to gather unto the name of Christ! It isn't simply "following Christ," but "gathering unto Him" collectively with the promise of His presence within every assembly meeting (Matthew 18:20). In doing so, Jesus is given His rightful place as the Head of His body, which is His church.

DOCTRINE OF “SEPARATION” (Necessary to avoid defilement from association with evil):

DEUT. 13:1-11 (follow not those who lead away from God’s word)

ISA. 8:12-13 (as Judah was to separate unto God, so are we!)

JER. 15:19 (discern the true from the false and to follow the truth)

I COR. 5:6-7; 15:33 (Purge out leaven; Evil communication corrupt good manners)

II COR. 6:14-18 (What fellowship have righteousness with unrighteousness and what communion hath light with darkness)

II THESS. 3:1-15 (Have no company with those living disobediently to God’s word)

I TIM. 6:3-5 (Withdraw from those teaching unsound doctrine)

II TIM. 2:19-22; 3:1-5 (Depart from persons of unsound doctrine and follow those of sound doctrine; Turn away from ungodly persons displaying a form of godliness)

HEB. 13:12-13 (Go therefore unto Him without the camp, bearing His reproach)

II JOHN vs. 6, 10 & 11 (Do not befriend those who do not abide in the doctrine of Christ)

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Holiness

The relationship between Christ, the holy one who knew no sin, and His church is affected by the functioning of the assemblies and their conduct and behavior. “O worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness: fear before him, all the earth” (Ps. 96.9). Holiness within the assembly is to be aspired to ensure that the honor and glory of a crucified and risen Savior is not defiled by unholy associations. Such unholy associations would also defile every aspect of the local assembly where the unholy associations occurred, as well as all the other assemblies within the circle of fellowship if one holds to the discipline of the “one body” (Eph. 4:4) because “a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump” (Gal. 5:9 and 1 Cor. 5:6)! Thus, it is necessary to be “separated” from such evil because the God we worship is Holy (sinless, perfect, righteous, loving, truthful, etc.).

Leviticus 11:44-45: “For I am the Lord your God: ye shall therefore sanctify yourselves, and ye shall be holy; for I am holy; neither shall ye defile yourselves with any manner of creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. For I am the Lord that bringeth you up out of the land of Egypt, to be your God: ye shall therefore be holy, for I am holy.”

Leviticus 20:26: “And ye shall be holy unto me: for I the Lord am holy, and have severed you from other people, that ye should be mine.”

Deuteronomy 23:14: “For the Lord thy God walketh in the midst of thy camp, to deliver thee, and to give up thine enemies before thee; therefore shall thy camp be holy: that he see no unclean thing in thee, and turn away from thee.

1 Peter 1:15-16: “But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversations; Because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy.”

All meetings of the assembly (remembrance meeting, prayer meeting, open ministry, etc.) include the presence of the Lord (Matt. 18:20). Since the Lord Jesus Christ is holy, all meetings of the assembly are a holy event requiring that we must attempt to not defile anything associated with Christ, by avoiding leaven (Gal. 5:9 and 1 Cor. 5:6). This means to have no association with the false doctrines, principles, practices, and traditions of Christendom because ***association with evil defiles.***

Compiled by Terry Fearington, December 2023.3