

THE MEETING OF THE CHURCH IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

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Acts 2:42: “And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”¹

Acts 2:46: “And day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart.”

Acts 20:7: “And on the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul began talking to them, intending to depart the next day, and he prolonged his message until midnight.”

1 Cor.14:26: “What is the outcome then, brethren? When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification” (See the entire passage, 14:26- 40).

1 Cor.16:2: “On the first day of every week let each one of you put aside and save, as he may prosper, that no collections be made when I come.”

Eph.4:11-12: “And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ.”

1 Tim.4:13: “Until I come, give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching.”

1 Tim.2:8: “Therefore, I want the men in every place to pray, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and dissension.”

Heb.10:24-25: “Let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more, as you see the day drawing near.”

I believe these are **the principal passages and Scripture texts** we ought to have in our minds as we consider the meeting of the church described in the New Testament.

Some Vital Questions

How does one do church? How did the early church worship? What was the purpose of their weekly gathering? How do we have a church meeting in New Testament style? What are the features of such a meeting? Does the meeting of the Church simply refer to a “**worship meeting**”

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are taken from the *New American Standard Bible*.

or a breaking of bread service? Were there several meetings during the week in the early church or just one gathering?

The above questions are significant and relevant to believers committed to the New Testament pattern and principles. Unfortunately, the New Testament records do not give us details about the format or order of early church gatherings. But we have our own cherished views about the meeting of the church. We strongly advocate or promote certain preferences, patterns and even an “order of worship” (this differs from assembly to assembly). It is almost unbelievable that we would constantly claim the leadership and exclusive guidance of the Holy Spirit in a meeting where we ourselves have spelled out *what* can be done, *when* it can be done, *how* it can be done, and by *whom* it can be done (there may be exceptions). We must be willing to admit that though our meeting is spontaneous and Spirit-guided to a great extent, it is not exclusively so. Practical and common-sense guidelines are indispensable to our meeting. We should not function in a state of suspended conclusion and disorder. We must act upon these matters with care, gentleness, tolerance, flexibility, and grace, **without the spirit of exclusive ownership of divine truth**. Let us be open to constant questioning and rethinking cherished views, asking the Holy Spirit to lead us to deeper understanding and the right application of the truth we hold dear. For this to happen, we must be willing to carefully search the Scriptures and to submit to its authority.

The Meeting of the Church in the New Testament (1 Cor.14:26-40)

The lack of precise details and a definitive list of clear commands for corporate gathering of the assembly does not keep us from knowing God’s will on this matter, however. His will is made known to us in the practices of the early church with the approval of the apostles. I believe, in matters related to the meeting of the church, we must accept the practices seen in the NT as perpetually binding upon the church by the authority of the apostolic precedent.

In 1 Cor.11, Paul gives instructions in relation to the conduct of the church around the Lord’s Supper. **In 1 Cor. 14**, he gives instructions regarding the conduct of the church with respect to ministry. In 1 Cor.14:1-25, Paul establishes the principle of edification as the overall purpose of the exercise of spiritual gifts. **In verses 26-40, the principle of edification is specifically applied to the meeting of the church** (Paul uses the word *church* seven times in this chapter).

The meeting of the church is the weekly gathering of the whole church on the first day of the week (Sunday) to carry out the essential functions that are given to the church. If we follow the example and pattern of the New Testament Church, there is **only one meeting that may be described as the meeting of the church** - it is the meeting as it was practiced by the apostles and described in the epistles (but the New Testament does not outline the proceedings of this meeting in detail). But we do find some basic guidelines on how to have a church meeting in New Testament style. **In 1 Cor.14:26-40**, we get a glimpse of the gathering and activity of the assembly at Corinth. **This is an important passage because it gives us the most intimate glimpse we have of the meeting of the early church.** We find a basic framework of what took place when believers met together for corporate worship on the first day of the week (the NT never actually uses the word “worship” for what early Christians did when they met). What a stark contrast is found here with the formal, inflexible, and ritualistic order of service that prevails in most of

Christendom today! Much has been lost by abandoning the Scriptural model of the meeting of the church.

“What is the outcome then, brethren? When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification” (1 Cor.14:26). **Several characteristics of this meeting are evident:**

1. It was open.
2. It was spontaneous.
3. It was participatory – A free-flowing church meeting with wide participation. Nobody was *paid* to participate as seen in many churches today.
4. Men are the leaders in what takes place in the meeting.
5. All were free to be involved but with mutual consideration. Although free participation is indicated, it is not to the point of disorder.
6. It was a meeting without any “professional” ministry (no mention of pastors, elders, deacons, or leaders of any sort who would be responsible to oversee, control or impose any guidelines). Nothing was tightly or humanly orchestrated.
7. It was a meeting without any settled format or order.
8. It was a meeting guided and superintended by the Holy Spirit.
9. It was a meeting for the Spirit-led exercise of spiritual gifts. Gifts should be exercised for the edification of the body (in the early days of the church there was also the exercise of the sign gifts of tongues, interpretation, and prophecy. Though the “sign-gifts” are not in existence today, the principles outlined in 1 Cor.14 for the regulation of gifts are still valid).
10. The focal point or the central element of this meeting was the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, though other elements were also present. Paul gives detailed counsel concerning the Lord’s Supper in 1 Cor.11:17-34 (note the repeated phrase related to the meeting of the church - “when you come together,” 11:17, 18, 20, 33, 34).

“Each one” and “anyone” (1 Cor.14:26, 27) points to free participation, but because such freedom might lead to disorder, Paul lays down **regulatory guidelines for orderly participation** (14:27-29). “Let all things be done for edification” (14:26). **Five kinds of participation are mentioned here – *Psalms*** (singing² or reading one of the Old Testament Psalms, contributing a hymn, or a song of praise); ***Teaching*** (exposition and teaching of the Scriptures); ***Revelation*** (declaring a truth given by direct revelation; an “inspired” speech); ***A tongue*** (the ability to speak in a foreign language without ever having learned it) and ***Interpretation*** (interpretation of tongues). **Do not overlook the fact that all these items except having ‘a Psalm’ are related to spiritual gifts.** In other words, it is not just meditations on the Lord’s Supper, praise, prayer, and worship, but men exercised their spiritual gifts as the Holy Spirit led them. **All these spiritual exercises happened in this one meeting.**

² There is no *clear* NT reference to a Christian assembly engaged in congregational singing. Eph.5:19; Col.3:16; Heb.13:15 imply singing with a worshipful spirit. Singing praises to God is clearly an act of worship. This is well established in view of the OT precedent. Singing is also designed to instruct, encourage, admonish, and edify one another (Col.3:16). Some songs are gospel songs. Some assemblies have their own policies on musical instruments. Yes, they have the freedom to do so. But it is unwise to make a theology based on faulty exegesis, traditions, and preferences. We should not commit the fallacy of equating *silence* in the Word with *prohibition*, which is a form of speaking where the Bible is silent.

The meeting was to be left to itself under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The only requirement was that everything should be aimed at building up the body of Christ (edification). **Though there was no established order of service, it was to be conducted in an orderly way.** “But all things be done properly and in an orderly manner” (1 Cor.14:40). Paul regulates both the quality (edifying) and the quantity (two or three) of participation (14:26-30). All this leads to the peace and order of which God is the author (14:33).

Look at churches today. What a tragic departure from the principles and practices of the early church! The professional ministry with its sophisticated order of service, humanly devised formats and elaborate liturgies as seen in most churches today seem to be a carryover from the Old Testament legal system. Do not mistake the traditional church service and denominational pageantry for the New Testament church meeting. They are as different as day is from night. Let us be careful and discerning.

The Major Components of The Meeting of the Church

1. The corporate worship of the church around the Lord’s Supper (Acts 2:42; 20:7; 1 Cor.11:17-34).
2. The teaching of the Word (Acts 2:42). There was spontaneous teaching (1 Cor.14:26) and systematic teaching (Acts 2:42; 20:7, 20, 27; Eph.4:11-12; 1 Tim.4:13; 2 Tim.4:2 etc. indicate the place and prominence of systematic teaching of the Word).
3. The Spirit-led exercise of spiritual gifts by audible participation by men. It was a time for teaching, exhortation, and praise (1 Cor.14:26; Heb.10:23-25).
4. Public reading of the Scriptures³ (1 Tim.4:13). The reader in Rev.1:3 is surely a public reader for he reads to hearers in the assembly.
5. Prayer (1 Tim.2:1-2, 8). Specifically evangelistic prayers for the salvation of unbelievers, for the government and those in authority.
6. Offering (1 Cor.16:1-2).
7. Missionary reports and words of testimony. It seems to me that Acts 14:27 as referring to the meeting of the church where Paul and Barnabas shared a missionary report. “And when they had arrived and gathered the church together, they began to report all things that God had done with them and how He had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.”
8. The meeting of the church was not primarily for evangelism. Its primary purpose was edification of the saints and the glorification of the Savior. But in one sense, evangelism also happens. It is possible that an unbeliever who may be present in the meeting will be convicted of his/her sin in the proclamation of the Word. Evangelism also happens in the proclamation of the Gospel in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. Additionally, the evangelistic intercessory prayer of the assembly facilitates evangelism.

Principles and Practical Lessons for Application

We can learn some timeless principles and practical lessons from the meeting of the church in the New Testament:

³ This is missing today in many Christian assemblies. We are asked to *stand* for singing, but the Scriptural precedent is to stand when the Word of God is read (Neh.8:5). The unified body of God’s people intent to hear the Word of God *stand* to honor the Word.

1. Though we may fall short of a perfect representation of the ideal of the meeting of the church as seen in the New Testament, I believe, it is important to have at least one meeting a week which is a free meeting in which there is opportunity for the exercise of spiritual gifts. Audible participation in the meeting should be done by men who are speaking to edify the church. The emphasis falls on the exercise of spiritual gifts to edify the body.
2. Only what is edifying should be encouraged in the meeting. Each member ministers for the benefit of the body. Each believer must view himself as in the service of Christ for the edification of the body (being aware of one's spiritual gift) both receiving from others and contributing to them.
3. The privilege of free participation should not be abused or misused to the point of disorder.
4. Our participation and exercise of spiritual gifts should be done with mutual respect and consideration for one another.
5. We should weigh carefully what is said or taught in the assembly. God expects us to discern His Word from which that is not His (1 Cor.14:29). If it was necessary to judge what was said by a "prophet," how much more should we judge what is taught in our assemblies today?
6. The Lord never expects one person to dominate the meeting.
7. The quality and quantity of participation must be regulated in the meeting of the church. Proportionate participation in the various elements of the meeting is always desirable. Disproportionate participation will create an imbalance in the various spiritual exercises of the meeting.
8. Even in an "open meeting" there are abiding controls. We should not forget the fact that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are under our control. Our gifts do not control us, nor do they compel us to violate the guidelines laid by the Holy Spirit. The tongues speaker had full control of his gift (14:27-28). Even the prophets under certain circumstances were to remain silent (14:29-30). It is interesting to note that silence is required not only of women (14:34-35), but at times also the tongues speaker (14:28), and even the prophet (14:30)! *Edification and silence seem to be the two most important things to be considered in the gathering of the church! Sometimes we can edify others more by our silence than by our speech.*

Points To Ponder

The corporate worship and remembrance in the celebration of the Lord's Supper, the centrality of the Word in teaching, exhortation, and edification, and prayer were all part of the meeting of the church. It was a meeting of the whole assembly on the first day of every week (Sunday). **It was not a meeting devoted exclusively to worship and remembrance in the celebration of the Lord's Supper. There is nothing wrong with a meeting that is exclusively devoted to the observance of the Lord's Supper. We do have the liberty for such a service. But a service that is exclusively worship & remembrance is NOT the meeting of the church as we find in the NT.** The meeting of the church was the meeting on the first day of every week for breaking of bread, worship, edification, teaching, fellowship, exhortation, and prayer. All these activities happened **in that one meeting** described in 1 Cor.14. Several elements made up the meeting of the church. This is an inescapable conclusion from the available evidence of this meeting as described in the NT.

We do not read about a multiplicity of meetings every day in the early church. It is true that in addition to the regular meeting of the church, other meetings also were conducted. In Acts 12, we find that the church met to pray for Peter's deliverance from prison. Paul taught daily in the school of Tyrannus at Ephesus for two years (Acts 19:9-10). Other meetings were also probably held by the church. But these meetings varied with time, need, place and special circumstances, **and were not regularly or consistently conducted by all the churches.** *So, these are meetings the church can legitimately conduct for teaching, prayer, equipping, outreach, etc. But these meetings are not the meeting of the church described in the New Testament.*

I could not find separate meetings regularly carried out in the New Testament. Such meetings are not seen or recognized. The whole church met together in one place for the meeting of the church to fulfill the various corporate duties and spiritual exercises given to the church. Even if there were other meetings (?), the stress rests upon the meeting of the church. I don't think we can call our Sunday gathering exclusively the meeting of the church in the New Testament sense. In the assemblies of Christians with whom I associate, we follow free participation in the worship/remembrance part of the meeting. But we do not generally practice free exercise of spiritual gifts for teaching, and exhortation, though I have attended some assemblies where they regularly practice these things also, in addition to the sharing of meditations related to the Lord's Supper.

What about evangelistic prayer? Of course, we have separate prayer meetings (sad to say, the most neglected and least attended meeting). Yes, we have the freedom to have any number of meetings and there is nothing wrong with that. Technically, any gathering the elders arrange or organize for the assembly is the meeting of the church. But in the light of the New Testament evidence, the meeting of the church is the meeting in which we have opportunity not only to observe the Lord's Supper but to exercise our spiritual gifts freely, and to pray. **This is the ideal and model the New Testament teaches.** *What the apostles practiced reflects what they believed. In matters that are not specifically commanded, the principle and apostolic practice are valid for us to emulate. Even in the meeting of the church, we must strive to follow their practices as far as we can.*

Today, we have separated the elements of the New Testament meeting of the church and set up an individual meeting for every component. **As a result, we have many separate meetings** – worship meeting, prayer meeting, Bible study meeting, testimony meeting, etc. In this full schedule of meetings almost every day of the week, **only a handful of people attend.** Most believers do not attend these meetings. Not much edification happens. In many places, it is the same people attending the weekday meetings, and it has even degenerated into a routine or a tradition, not accomplishing much. Rather than the multiplicity of meetings, we need to ponder more upon the importance of the meeting of the church and strive to make it more edifying. *It is the New Testament pattern.* When we separate and isolate the various elements of the meeting of the church into separate meetings, it is just like dissecting a living organism. Its vitality will be lost. The various elements of the meeting of the church (worship, teaching, praise, prayer, exhortation, etc.) are interrelated and cannot be successfully separated. All these components

should work together as a whole unit, to the blessing of the body of Christ and for the glory of our Savior.⁴

Ideally, the meeting of the church in the New Testament is a meeting in which we have opportunity to observe the Lord's Supper with spontaneous praise and worship, and for the exercise of gifts freely. It is also the occasion for the public reading of Scripture, systematic exposition of the Word and evangelistic prayer. When we claim NT pattern, let us make sure, we go all the way to embrace the pattern.

The meeting of the church is the focal point of New Testament church principles pertaining to remembrance and worship, spiritual gifts, headship of Christ, Church being the body of Christ, and the priesthood of believers. These vital church truths are beautifully demonstrated in the meeting of the church. All these principles converge and find their culmination in the meeting of the church.

Summary and Conclusion

Though many of us believe and practice an "open meeting," (The Meeting of the Church to some extent) I wonder whether we have seriously considered the nature, characteristics, and components of the "open meeting" and its relevance for today. The Lord of the Church has planned the weekly meeting of the church as dynamic, edifying and glorifying to His name. Hence, it should be more meaningful, relevant, and enjoyable to us. Through the study and interpretation of the Scriptures, we must understand the nature of the meeting of the church and how it is to be conducted. No man-made rule or tradition should deter us from following the simple truth about the meeting of the Church. We must be willing to correct our misunderstanding in this matter.

Do we need to do what the early church did in the meeting of the church? Yes, we must try to follow that model as much as possible and as closely as possible. In addition to praise and worship, meditations on the Lord's Supper, there should be opportunities for men to get up and share what the Lord has laid in their hearts for the edification of the body, a time to share a word of testimony, or a missions report, and time for evangelistic prayer. In addition to these unplanned, unscheduled, and spontaneous spiritual exercises, we should not neglect the importance of planned, scheduled systematic teaching of the Word. We need to have a balance in teaching, exhortation, fellowship, prayer, worship, and remembrance in the meeting. Division of these functions almost always promote imbalance.

Our emphasis should not be on multiple meetings every day of the week, poorly attended, and not accomplishing much; too many meetings, and not enough time for anything. It creates schedule conflicts, and we must make choices in which we are compelled to omit some important aspects of church activity and certain meetings. **I am not suggesting that we do not need any meetings other than Sunday.** But I am strongly encouraging us to follow the biblical model of the meeting of the church and at the same time to seriously evaluate the quality and the

⁴ Though we have the liberty to have separate meetings, let us realistically evaluate its edifying value. Are these meetings accomplishing its intended goals as prescribed in the Word of God?

productivity of the weekday meetings. Let us be flexible and practical, willing to make appropriate changes that will build up the body of Christ. May the Lord give us a burden and a vision to follow the meeting of the church in the New Testament style.

It is of great significance that Paul concluded 1 Corinthians 14 with a reminder that these instructions are not merely culturally or geographically conditioned principles; rather Paul was writing a “command of the Lord.” In 1 Cor.14:37-38, Paul gives his strongest claim to authority as God’s apostle. “If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that **the things which I write to you, are the Lord’s commandment**” (14:37. Emphasis added). Paul is not making recommendations or giving his preferences; he is writing the commandments of God.

Do not mistake the traditional church service held in churches across the world with the New Testament church meeting. If you go to most churches today, and you read the New Testament, it makes you wonder how the two ever got together!!