

## **A SCRIPTURAL ASSEMBLY**

Scriptures read: Matt. 18:20; Acts 2:41, 42; 11:19-26; 13:1-3; 14-21-23; 20:6,7.  
1 Cor. 14:26, 16:1-2. 1 Tim. 3:15.

(Taken from Andrew Stenhouse of Chile's Book "True Evangelism, and Other Addresses")

The idea of a church or assembly, whether universal or local, is God's idea. Christians do not meet together in groups or congregations merely because they consider it desirable or helpful, but because God has so ordained it. It was our Lord Himself who first spoke of the church in its universal aspect when (in Matt. 16:18) He intimated that He Himself was to be the builder and that it was to be built on a sure foundation. And it was He also who first intimated (in Matt. 18:17) that there would be such a thing as a local assembly, to which matters of conduct and right relations between believers might be referred.

It was the Holy Spirit who, on the day of Pentecost, baptized all existing believers into one body and so formed the nucleus of the church universal; and it was the Holy Spirit who likewise gathered the saints together in assembly capacity in the various localities where they were found. Since that time, however, the will of man, governed by many and varied ideas and ambitions, has been responsible for bringing into existence all kinds of ecclesiastical organizations, and to these, unfortunately, the majority of present-day Christians belong.

Our present purpose is to enquire, with the help of Holy Scripture, as to the nature and characteristics of a truly scriptural assembly, gathered according to the mind of God. Such an assembly will be seen to present features that are in marked contrast with what obtains generally in Christendom.

(1) A truly Christian and scriptural assembly is composed necessarily of true believers—that is, of people who, having believed the gospel, have experienced the miracle of new birth, and know themselves to be "children of God by faith in our Lord Jesus Christ." Only such have any right to belong to a church of God. The apostle Paul could speak of "churches of the saints," because saved and sanctified people composed them. Unconverted people could not possibly participate in worship and other holy activities of the church, nor could they be expected to support its testimony by holy living. Christians are therefore exhorted not to be unequally yoked together with unbelievers, but to come out from among them and be separate. (2 Cor. 6:14-18.)

(2) All converted people in apostolic times were baptized as such, before taking their place in association with the assemblies (Acts 2:41; 8:12, etc.) Christ had commanded that this should be done (Matt. 28:19), and the baptizing of disciples always resulted from the preaching of the gospel. The same rule is observed by scriptural assemblies today, and the doctrine of baptism, as found in Romans, Chapter 6, should accompany the practice. New converts should be taught that baptism (that is immersion) is the symbol and figure of their being buried with Christ, with a view to their arising (in the likeness of His resurrection) to walk in newness of life.

(3) In a truly scriptural assembly the saints are gathered to Christ, as indicated in Matt. 18-20. The Lord Himself is the true and only centre, and the assembly is where His divine presence is known in a special way. In many so-called "churches" the centre of gathering is a special set of doctrines, a scheme of church government, a human tradition, a sacrament, or even a heresy. Many, preachers constitute themselves a centre of attraction, and people belong to "Mr. So-and-So's church" because they like his preaching or his personality. This is very different from being gathered unto Christ. He is the one and only centre in heaven, and He is worthy that all His people in any given locality on earth be gathered unto Him in the same way.

(4) In a scriptural assembly or church the name of the Lord Jesus Christ is deemed to be all-sufficient. In His name, and His alone, the believers are gathered together. No other name is worthy to be associated with His. If the assembly is a scriptural one, it belongs to Him, and His sole Lordship is recognized. A true "church of Christ" could never bear a human or sectarian name. Distinctive names, whether derived from church leaders, doctrines, forms of government, or what not, are all badges of division. The name of Christ alone unites.

To be gathered in or unto His name means to be gathered in His interests, with His authority, in subjection to His Lordship, and in subjection to His Word. Christians who know what it is to be so gathered can never tolerate to be called by any other name than His. More-over, the name of "Christians" was divinely given to the disciples. (See Acts 11:26, where the Greek verb translated "called" is a special one implying that it was God who called the disciples by this name.)

(5) In a scriptural assembly the Word of God is recognized as complete and authoritative. In other words, there is no need of creeds, statements of doctrine, church constitutions, rules or regulations, other than those contained in Scripture itself. No man or body of men has ever been competent to draw up an infallible statement of Christian faith and practice, nor is there any need, for God's Word should always be appealed to directly to settle all disputes. It is dishonouring to the Word of God to displace it by appealing to any other authority.

(6) The Holy Spirit is the Vicar of Christ upon earth during the time of our Lord's absence, and it is of the utmost importance that He should be allowed His place in every local assembly. The power of the Holy Spirit is the only power for worship, ministry or evangelism. His presence and control make all things possible, but it is easy, to dis-place Him in His gracious ministrations by substituting human arrangements. It is common in many congregations to have one man preside as "minister" or "pastor," and all activities are under his control. He may reserve for himself the privilege of preaching and praying, or he may call upon others to do so, but the principle is the same: he usurps the place of the Holy Spirit, whose office in the assembly is to direct the worship, ministry, and other spiritual exercises of the saints. (See I Cor. 12 and 14.) It is significant that in Scripture no assembly is seen to be presided over or directed by one man, except in the case of Diotrephes, who did it contrary to the will of God. (3 John 9.)

(7) Scripture teaches that all believers are priests (1 Peter 2:5; Heb. 13:15), so that all believers may participate in worship and prayer in the assembly. The only restriction is with regard to the sisters, who are commanded to be in subjection and not take part audibly. (1 Cor. 14:34; 1 Tim. 2:11, 12.) The fact that the women are commanded to be silent shows that the men were free to speak provided it were under the direction of the Holy Spirit.

(8) With regard to ministry in the assembly, Scripture teaches that God has given gifts for this purpose—men who are spiritually qualified to teach and exhort. They are not the product of a seminary but they are men who have been taught of God and endowed with ability to expound and apply the truth of God in a spiritual way. (See Eph. 4:11, 12.) Scripture nowhere teaches that the ministry of the Word should be in the hands of one man; nor does it teach that all brethren may minister. Whether for teaching or preaching, we are dependent on the gifts whom God has given, and it is the Holy Spirit's prerogative to use them where and when He will. Human arrangements should never interfere with this. The Holy Spirit controls evangelists in their movements. (See Acts 16:6, 7.)

(9) From Scripture we learn that for the right ordering of the assemblies, elders or overseers were appointed by the Holy Spirit. These were men who by their godly living and good example had shown themselves worthy of being recognized as leaders of the flock. See Heb. 13:17, where the phrase "them that have the rule over you" means literally "your leaders," or "them that go before you" (that is, giving an example and showing the way). The words "elders," "leaders," "overseers," etc., are always found in the plural, for no assembly was ever committed to the care of one man. The equality of elders or overseers is deduced from the Scriptures which refer to them. In Acts 20 it will be seen that the persons described as elders in verse 17 are called overseers in verse 28, and their work is described as that of pastors or shepherds, so that these terms can never be employed as having reference to different ranks of church officers. Still less will the distinction between "clergy" and "laity" be found in Scripture. Elders were men who had a care for the flock and served the Lord in this capacity voluntarily, "not for filthy lucre." Their ability to do this depended on their moral and spiritual qualifications. (See I Tim. 3 and Titus 1.)

(10) In a Scriptural assembly the Lord's Supper, or Breaking of Bread, occupies an important place as the centre of the church's activities. Being a divine appointment, it can never be relegated to a place of secondary importance, or treated as a matter for occasional obedience. It is evident from Acts 20:7 that the practice of the assemblies in apostolic times was to break bread every Lord's Day. It is the remembrance of the Lord in His own appointed way that produces true worship, and worship is one of the principal functions of the assembly. True worship produces true service, and every other activity is likewise derived from it. Not only should the Lord's Supper be observed on the first day of every week, but it should be observed in the conditions contemplated in 1st Corinthians—not as a sacrament administered by a clergyman, but as a remembrance feast partaken of by disciples meeting together in subjection to the Holy Spirit and not presided over by any man.

(11) An essential feature of every Scriptural assembly is the preservation of that pilgrim character which the Lord Himself impressed upon it. When the hour of His rejection came, He took his disciples to an upper room called a guest-chamber, or lodging-place for transients. Born Himself in the stable of an inn, He taught His disciples not to aspire to anything more than He had. The early Christians met in upper rooms and private houses and it was not to

the detriment of their testimony. Theirs was an “Other world” religion, and it needed no consecrated buildings. They themselves were the church and the temple of God, and they borrowed nothing from the world which had rejected their Lord. Extreme simplicity marked them in all things, “that the excellency of the power might be of God.”

(12) A Scriptural assembly is characterized by true evangelism. The Thessalonian assembly was commended because from it sounded out the Word of the Lord throughout Macedonia and Achaia. The Corinthian church was to be a stepping-stone to the regions beyond it. The Philippians were supporters of the missionary labours of Paul. True evangelism is absent in many quarters. The gospel is never preached in many so-called churches. In others, questionable methods are used and the results are artificial. Only the gospel of Christ, preached in the power of the Holy Ghost by men whom God has qualified, can be expected to produce genuine conversions.

(13) Regarding money matters, God has also enlightened us in His Word as to what is agreeable to Him. The assemblies were instructed to give bountifully of their substance. The privilege was theirs of contributing to the work of the Lord or the needs of poor saints. They were to put aside weekly a portion of their income for such purposes according as God had prospered them. (1 Cor. 16:2.) The proportion of their giving depended on their individual exercise of heart and love for the Saviour. Giving was voluntary, and it needed the right motive to be acceptable. Needless to say, no unconsecrated money could be accepted for holy purposes, so that public collections are foreign to the practice of Christian assemblies.

(14) The support of evangelists, missionaries and other workers is a privilege of all Christians and Christian assemblies, but the methods employed should be in accordance with Scriptural principles. Workers do not receive salaries from any church or missionary society, but must be dependent on God. They must keep themselves free from the control of any organized body, if they are to know the control of the Holy Spirit. Their dependence upon God for their material or financial support is a healthy discipline and keeps them from becoming high-minded. It also keeps them free to minister the Word of God as those who shall give account to Him and not to men. And as they prove God faithful in His dealings with them, they are the better fitted to minister in fellowship with Him.

(15) Finally, we shall mention that God’s Word provides for a system of discipline in connection with the assembly that is in keeping with its holy character and functions. Since the assembly is the house of God, a certain type of behaviour is required of all who belong to it. (1 Tim. 3:15.) If this behaviour is not maintained; certain steps are to be taken with a view to restoring Scriptural order. There is only time for the briefest mention of these:

In Gal. 6:1 we see that if one is overtaken in a fault, they who are spiritual are to seek his restoration. If a brother trespass against another, he is to be sought after by the offended one and restored to amicable relations. (Matt. 18:15.) Elders are to exhort; rebuke and reprove unruly and vain talkers and convince them of their errors. (2 Tim. 4:1-2; Titus 1:9-11.) A causer of divisions is to be avoided (Rom. 16:17-18), and a disorderly person withdrawn from (2 Thess. 3:6). A heretic who refuses correction is to be rejected (Titus 3:9-11), and one who stubbornly refuses to be reconciled to a brother whom he has offended is to be treated as “a heathen man and a publican” (Matt. 18:17). A person guilty of immoral conduct or who teaches erroneous doctrine of a serious nature, is to be put away from the assembly and refused all fellowship. (1 Cor. 5:13; 2 John 10; 1 Tim. 1:20.) In this way the holiness that becomes God’s house is to be maintained.

In the foregoing, we have set forth some fifteen essential features of the Christian assembly. Not one of them can be omitted without gravely interfering with God’s purpose and working. Yet in many so-called Christian congregations today, these Scriptural principles are altogether lacking. How dare we call them Christian?

On the other hand we are thankful to recognize that in many places today there exist Christian assemblies formed and maintained after the pattern of Holy Scripture. We are thankful for the privilege of being associated with them, but we should have an exercise about leading other Christians into the same path of obedience to the Word of God. Let us not be proud, but humbly acknowledge the goodness of God and seek grace that in our assemblies may be exhibited not only correct Scriptural order, but also the love of Christ and the power of the Holy Ghost.