

When Christians Got Together (Part 3)

Essay # 9

In the last two essays we took a brief tour of Acts to see what we could learn about what Christians did when they got together. We also looked for things that were PREscribed and things that were merely DEscribed. We saw that there was really nothing PREscribed in regards to Christian assemblies. We now turn our attention to the remainder of the New Testament. We'll just go book to book – briefly!

Romans

Let's start with Romans. Okay – we're done. See how brief that was! And you thought I was talking about "brief" in preacher terms! No, I really mean it. Interestingly enough, in what is considered to be one of Paul's greatest letters he has practically nothing to say about Christian assemblies. The closest we get is in Romans 14 where Paul says that some Christians may hold certain days more sacred than others and that is perfectly fine. In fact, he calls on the Romans not to sit in judgment on those who do look at some days as more holy than others – "Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another" (v. 13). He also says not to put a stumbling block in another brother's way. Don't let your preferences cause another person to stumble – note, he did not say anything about causing a brother to GRUMBLE – only about what might cause someone to LOSE THEIR FAITH. That doesn't mean we should have blatant disregard for others but we have often let the stumble verse be used as a club by the "weaker" brother. It doesn't seem to me that Paul was advocating that. A main point comes in verse 19 and would apply to all areas of life including Christian assemblies – "Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification."

One other note from Romans – in chapter 16:5 we see that a portion of the church met in Aquila and Priscilla's house.

1 Corinthians

We certainly have more to look at in 1 Corinthians. Most of it comes toward the end of the letter and it is not so much in the form of "Rules for All Churches Everywhere" as it is an "occasional" document. That is, it is written in response to some specific problems in Corinth. It really gets

cranked up in chapter 11 but there is also mention in chapter 5 of Christians assembling and then expelling one of their fellow members for persistent, unrepentant immorality (verses 4 & 5).

The first half of chapter 11 has to do with head coverings in regard to the act of praying and prophesying. We've already covered this in a previous essay so for now we'll just point out that the vast majority of scholars believe that Paul has a regular gathering in mind here, presumably the Sunday meeting. If that's the case, then we have Christian men and women praying and prophesying in the assembly – that certainly gels with what we've already seen in Acts where praying and prophesying are mentioned more than once when Christians got together and we've even seen women prophets mentioned in Acts.

The latter half of chapter 11 addresses what we usually call the Lord's Supper. We see that these believers got together to eat and drink and remember the Lord and the significance of his death, burial and resurrection by eating bread and drinking wine. I like to think of it as toasting the Lord with a cup of thanksgiving. That's not meant to trivialize the Supper, it's meant to point us in a different direction from the solemn, highly individualistic, overly-introspective focus that the Supper has evolved into over time. It's meant as a toast of honor and gratitude to our Savior and to remind us of the freedom we have in Christ – lest we forget. Chapter 10:16 refers to the cup of thanksgiving and the bread as a participation in the body of Christ. (I'm obviously editorializing even more than usual here – sorry about that – there, I slid the soap box back in the corner – for the moment).

Chapter 12 informs that different believers had different gifts and that the purpose of the gifts was not merely for individual benefit or expression but for the building up of others (in and out of the assembly). Verse 28 mentions some of the gifts you might have seen exercised in (and out) of the assembly: Apostles, prophets, teachers, workers of miracles, gifts of healing, helping others, taking care of administrative issues, speaking in different kinds of languages.

Chapter 14 informs us again that prophesying took place in the assembly. There were words of instruction and revelations of knowledge and the purpose was to strengthen, encourage and comfort other believers (v. 3) – there's that horizontal component again. We also see people speaking in different languages while others interpreted for those who did not understand the language the speaker was using. There was an emphasis on doing things in a way that was intelligible and that built up others. Praying and giving thanks are also mentioned. There is also mention of outsiders

being a part of the assembly and the hope is that they will be persuaded by what they see and hear to “fall down and worship God” (v. 25).

In verse 26 we see that the assemblies involved participation by most everyone present. “When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a language or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church.” I’d say that’s a pretty good summation of what Christians did when they got together and what they were hoping to accomplish with their assemblies. Paul concludes by correcting some abuses that were taking place in Corinth. Their assembly was characterized by division, competition, pride and chaos. Paul exhorts the believers to do everything in an orderly manner. People should take turns and know when to be quiet – specifically he mentions prophets, people speaking in different languages and women who were being disruptive and unruly. “For God is not a God disorder but of peace – as in all the congregations of the saints” (v. 33).

In chapter 16 Paul tells the Corinthians to set aside money on the first day of the week for a special collection for famine relief. He says he also asked the Galatian churches to do the same thing. Note that the instruction in chapter 16 is NOT pertaining to a regular weekly collection for the ongoing work of the church in Corinth. Paul is asking them, for the first time, to be setting aside money for Christians in another region who are in need.

In 16:19, the Aquila/Priscilla house church is mentioned again.

2 Corinthians

This letter doesn’t really have much to say about Christians in assembly. Paul does encourage the Corinthians to be generous in their “disaster relief” contributions and he warns about false apostles but nothing specific to assembly is really covered.

Galatians

Not much to comment on here either except in 4:10 he gets down on some people who were celebrating special days, months and years. At first blush, his statement here appears to contradict what he said about special days in Romans but we will address that in our essay on Law and Grace. For now, let’s just say that these guys were probably attaching too much significance to the need for observing special days, etc.

Ephesians

In chapter 4 Paul mentions some of the same gifts that we found in 1 Corinthians – apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers – “to prepare God’s people for works of service” (horizontal component again). These gifts are not specifically mentioned in regard to the assembly but I am assuming they were practiced both in and out of the assembly based on what we’ve already seen in other books.

In 5:19, 20 we see singing mentioned – not specifically in an assembly context – but mentioned. It is interesting to note that many of those who believe that the praying and prophesying in the first half of 1 Corinthians 11 is NOT in the assembly are adamant that the singing mentioned here in Ephesians is definitely referring to the assembly despite the fact there is no specific mention of it. We do know that hymns were sung in the assembly – we saw that back in 1 Corinthians as well. It’s just that I don’t think we should look at this passage in Ephesians as “I COMMAND YOU TO SING IN THE ASSEMBLY WHETHER YOU WANT TO OR NOT.” Christians just sing. They sing when they’re happy. They sing when they’re sad. They sing to encourage and uplift each other. They sing to praise God. They sing in the assembly. They sing in the car. I’m told that some even sing in the shower and I’m also told that that’s where some should keep their singing! Of course, it was easier for those guys back in the first century. Why? No four part harmony and no shape notes!! They just chanted. Hey, I can even do that. We’ve talked about these verses in a previous essay on instrumental music so I won’t go into detail on them again here except to say that the emphasis in these verses is not on the style of music but on the content and intent of the music.

In chapter 6 Paul encourages believers to pray all the time (that would definitely include the assembly then). He asks for prayers for himself and for all the saints.

Philippians

Nothing much about the assembly in this letter.

Colossians

In 2:16 we see that some still kept religious festivals, New Moon celebrations and Sabbath days.

In 3:16, believers are encouraged to teach and admonish one another with all wisdom and as they sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Verse 17 mentions giving thanks. Again, these actions are not mentioned in specific connection with the assembly but I think practically everyone would agree that these activities took place both in and out of the assembly.

In 4:15 we see that some of the church met in a woman's house (Nympha). Verse 16 informs that Paul had his letters circulated and read in the assemblies.

1 Thessalonians

Prophecies are alluded to in 5:20 and, in verse 27, Paul urges them to read his letter to all the brothers but that's about it.

2 Thessalonians

In 2:2 we get the impression that prophecies, reports and letter reading took place in the assembly.

1 Timothy

Perhaps we could take 1:7 to imply that teaching of the Law took place in the assembly (assembly not specifically mentioned though). Requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving made for everyone in 2:1. Verse 8 encourages men everywhere to lift holy hands in prayer. Timothy is encouraged to continue in the public reading of Scripture, teaching and preaching in 4:13. Some elders also were involved in preaching and teaching (5:17). Elders were also publicly rebuked when necessary (v. 20). Laying on of hands was practiced (v. 22) – in fact, Hebrews 6:2 includes laying on of hands in the category of elementary teachings. We'll talk more about that in another essay.

2 Timothy

Not much to talk about here although Timothy is encouraged to preach the Word, correct, rebuke and encourage (4:2).

Titus

“You must teach what is in accord with sound doctrine” (2:1). That’s about it.

Philemon

Verse 2 mentions the church that met in the home of Archippus.

Hebrews

The writer urges his readers to encourage one another daily (3:13). I suppose that must include the assembly. Chapter 9:1 talks about how the first (old) covenant had regulations for worship. I believe the implication is that, by way of contrast, the New covenant does not, but that’s my opinion. Can’t prove it from that verse alone. Although verse 10 does say that these external rules and ceremonies only applied until the time of the new order. I’ll come back to this in the conclusion. Believers are told that it is important for them to continue to assemble together and to encourage one another (horizontal component) in 10:24,25.

James

Chapter 2:3 alludes to a gathering where certain people are (wrongly) being given preferential seating. Chapter 3:1 mentions teachers. Chapter 5:13 talks about praying and singing but probably not in an assembly context.

1 Peter

I don’t really see anything here about assemblies.

2 Peter

Some Christians had feasts together (2:13)

1,2, & 3 John

Nothing much here about assemblies.

Jude

Some Christians met together for love feasts (v. 12). Many scholars believe that the Lord's Supper was taken in connection with these feasts.

Revelation

There's really not too much here about Christian assemblies in the first century.

Conclusion

Again, I'll be brief. There is not really any specific pattern for Christian assemblies that is mandated in the New Testament – certainly nothing like what we see under the Old Covenant. The Old Covenant had regulations for worship. Does the New Covenant? I don't think so – at least not in the way we usually think of rules, regulations and requirements. We do see certain principles emphasized. God wants Christian gatherings to be characterized by order. He wants them to be intelligible and to be uplifting and encouraging so that those present will be strengthened and, in the case of visitors, result in belief and worship of God. Praying, singing, teaching, prophesying, healing, reading scripture, etc. are all mentioned more than once. No specific day, time or location is mandated for meeting. It seems that meeting as often as possible was the idea. Praising God, strengthening and encouraging one another, giving instruction and converting guests seem to be some of the main points for Christian assemblies. That leaves a lot of room for a lot of things to take place in Christian assemblies. Maybe we should think a little more "out of the box" when it comes to what we do when we get together. Our God is pretty creative – maybe it's time we follow his example and get a little creative ourselves!

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