

The Local Assembly: The Believer's Refuge

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The house of God...is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth. (1 Tm 3:15).

The local assembly is God's household—a community of believers called out from the world who honor and submit to divine rule and order. God designed the assembly to be “the pillar and ground of the truth.” As the *pillar* (monument, kiosk) of the truth, the assembly displays and proclaims it to the world; as the *ground* (foundation, basis) of the truth, the assembly preserves and defends it.

According to the NT pattern, God intends every believer to belong to a local assembly. He planned the assembly to be our refuge from error and sin and futility, a haven from the world. He designed the assembly to train us for the work of the ministry (Ep 4:11-3). By belonging to an assembly and participating in its activities, we will receive all that God intends for us in this life. We will find protection, nourishment, and encouragement.

1. Assemblies are a Remnant Testimony.

Since scriptural assemblies today are rather small and insignificant in the world's eyes, it may seem strange that God would preserve His truth in such places. It would seem that truth could better be maintained in seminaries and by large church organizations. But that has never been God's way. In every era of history, unlikely people have preserved His truth. Before the flood, only Noah's family maintained the truth. Later, God chose Israel out of all the nations on earth to preserve His truth, and after the Babylonian Diaspora, only a few “feeble” Jews like Ezra and Nehemiah maintained His Word. When Christ came, only a few families looked for Him, families represented by Anna and Simeon.

When He introduced the assembly, Christ spoke of “two or three” (Mt 18:20). He would not require an impressive number to assure His presence “in the midst of them”; on the contrary, He implied that assembly testimony would again be a remnant. Even in apostolic days, “not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble [have been] called; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise...that no flesh should glory in His presence” (1 Cr 1:26-29).

When we defend the doctrine of the assembly, we must avoid self-congratulation and self-justification. We are very imperfect, and we have certainly not lived up to the truth that God has graciously entrusted to us. We must never regard ourselves as more faithful, insightful, or deserving than others, or let our pride say, “No doubt we are the people, and wisdom will die with us” (Jb 12:2).

2. The Distinction between the Church and the Churches.

A “church” (Greek *ekklesia*) is a group of believers whom God calls out from the world. God is doing this in two ways at once, however, and thus the NT speaks of the “church” on two levels. On a universal scale, Christ is building the Church which is His Body (Mt 16:18; Rm 12:5; 1 Cr 12:13). When completed, this multitude, the Bride of Christ (Ep 5:31-32), will include every believer from Pentecost (Ac 2:1-4) to the Rapture. In contrast, on a local scale, God is calling believers out from the world and gathering them to the Name of the Lord Jesus (Mt 18:20). Each of these local assemblies is a group of baptized believers who meet to celebrate the Lord's Supper, teach the Bible, pray, preach the gospel, and share with one another (Ac 2:41-2). Bowing to the authority of Scripture, each member is in fellowship with Christ and with all the other believers in the company.

A company of Christians in a locality gathered by the Holy Spirit to the Name of the Lord Jesus constitutes a local church in that place. The company may have many members, or just two or three (Mt 18:20). *Elders* are raised up by the Holy Spirit to oversee in spiritual matters (1 Tm 3:1-7; Tt 1:5-9). The work of the assembly, from spiritual ministry to mundane activities, is performed by *deacons* (Ac 6:2-7; 1 Tm 3:8-13). The local assembly thus differs markedly from the Church which is Christ's Body: One is visible, the

other invisible; one is local, the other universal; one exists in the present, the other spans the centuries. Yet the unity that exists in the large Church (Ep 4:4-6) should exist in the local church as well (Ep 4:3).

3. A Refuge From False Worship.

God is First. The Bible consistently teaches that *God is first*. The Ten Commandments start with God's interests, and end with human issues. The Tabernacle plan begins with the hidden Ark of the Covenant—God's dwelling place—and ends with the visible furniture and the courtyard. And the Burnt Offering, which was all for God, takes first place among the offerings.

The Assemblies is for God. The primary purpose of an assembly is to honor God. "Lord, I have loved the habitation of Thine house and the place where Thine honor dwelleth" (Ps 26:8). Unscriptural Christian organizations, by their structure and policies, cannot honor God in the unique ways that assemblies can. Our chief concern must always be that God receives His rightful honor.

Honoring the Father. *Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto Thy name give glory for thy loving-kindness and for Thy truth's sake* (Ps 115:1). Christendom has turned from God-centered worship to man-centered therapy. So-called "worship" services are taken up with anything but true worship—giving to the Lord the glory due His Name and reveling in the beauty of His holiness (Ps 29:1-2). The local assembly places priority on worship, and devotes the Lord's Supper in particular to the pure, unbroken worship and praise of God. The assembly honors God by giving Him His portion first.

Honoring the Son. The assembly honors Christ by gathering in His Name alone (Mt 18:20), by giving no titles to men (Mt 23:8-9), by acknowledging only one Pastor—the Chief Shepherd (1 Pt 5:4), and by displaying headship (1 Cr 11:2-12).

Honoring the Holy Spirit. The assembly honors the Holy Spirit by acknowledging that only He can add to the assembly (Ac 2:47), by recognizing that only He can appoint elders (Ac 20:28) and call to service (Ac 13:2), by teaching that only He distributes gifts and lead in their exercise (1 Cr 12:18,24,28), by acknowledging that He resides in the assembly (1 Cr 3:16), and by submitting to His presidency and leading in worship (1 Cr 14).

The Priesthood of All Believers. A local assembly teaches and practices the priesthood of all believers—men and women. As a *holy* priesthood, we "offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God by Jesus Christ" (1 Pt 2:5). We "offer the sacrifice of praise to God...the fruit of our lips giving thanks to His name" (Hb 13:15). As a *royal* priesthood, we proclaim "the praises of Him who hath called [us] out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Pt 2:9). Women and men function as priests in these public exercises, but brethren serve as spokesmen, in keeping with headship.

Stunted or Squandered Gift. All assembly activities are priestly activities. No gift is needed to bless God, but the Holy Spirit does distribute gifts—divine abilities—to enable us to bless men. Through the exercise of these gifts the gospel is preached and believers are edified, exhorted, comforted, and guided (Rm 12:3-8; 1 Cr 12:1-11). The assembly is the only venue where *all* the gifts of *all* believers can be used to their full potential.

4. A Refuge from False Doctrine.

The Divine Pattern. A local assembly holds the Word of God as its sole authority. It publishes no creeds, preferring instead to let the Scriptures speak for themselves. It sees the Word of God as a positive pattern or blueprint for the church, just as God's instructions to Moses were an explicit pattern for the tabernacle (Ex 25:8-9,40; Hb 8:5). No additions or deletions are permitted (Rv 22:18-19).

The Ground of the Truth. Assemblies are certainly not immune from false teaching (Ac 20:29-30). Yet God has designed the assembly to be "the pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Tm 3:15), the place where simple believers continue steadfastly in the Apostle's Doctrine (Ac 2:42). Because "not many wise according to the flesh...are called" (1 Cr 1:26), the world would regard the assembly as unqualified to guard the truth. Yet while church councils and seminaries have a unvarying history of apostasy, simple NT assemblies continue to hold the very same teaching proclaimed by the apostles nearly 2,000 years ago.

The Person of Christ. God preserves more than just church doctrine in His assemblies. The doctrine of the Person of Christ, e.g., is maintained in purest form among assemblies. False views about Christ's deity, sonship, incarnation, and impeccability are common even among the best teachers in Christendom.

5. A Refuge from False Government.

A Theocracy. Assembly government is not a democracy, but rather a theocracy, an expression of the universal kingdom of God in this age. The assembly is governed by the Holy Spirit (1 Cr 14) through His inspired Word (1 Cr 14:37). The Scriptures are thus our Constitution, with no deviation permitted. The leaders in the assembly simply administrate that Word; their authority is delegated.

Guides. The only Lord and Head of the assembly is the Lord Jesus Himself. Under Christ, the Holy Spirit raises up a plurality of men to be responsible for the well being of the assembly (Ac 20:28). These leaders (1 Th 5:12; Hb 13:17) are called by three names in the NT: elder, overseer, and shepherd. As elders, they are *mature* men. Having spent time in God's school, elders have acquired some spiritual maturity and wisdom. The word *overseer* suggests spiritual *authority* and *rule*. Overseers are vigilant for hostile forces and encroaching doctrinal or moral evil, and they are responsible to deal with these when they find them. As *shepherds*, the leaders *guide* and *care for* the flock, leading the sheep to water and green pastures.

The Cry for a Merely Human King. In Saul's day, the Israelites cried, "Appoint us a king to judge us, like all the nations" (1 Sm 8:5). Many assemblies have taken up the same cry. An assembly is like a volunteer army, and in the hectic pace of modern life it's easier to hire someone to do the work. Yet to advance one man above others is to detract from the centrality of Christ and to deviate from the pattern. Notice that God told Samuel, "They have not rejected you, but they have rejected me."

Autonomy. A local assembly is linked to other local assemblies in spiritual fellowship and in no other way. This fellowship is expressed by mutual love and care. Means of communication such as magazines help to express this fellowship. Each assembly functions completely autonomously, however. No body or magazine can define which assemblies are "real."

6. A Refuge from False Association.

Being Added and Joining. To protect us from doctrinal and moral evil, God designed assemblies to have defined memberships. Following the pattern of Mt 18:20, the Holy Spirit added believers to the first assembly (Ac 5:14). Notice that they were believers *before* they were added, and that the Lord Himself was the attracting force. The power of God was so palpable that no unbelievers dared to join them (Ac 5:13)—whether to join was an adult decision that followed a careful and sober understanding of the facts.

"Within" and "Without." Each assembly thus has a "within" and a "without" (1 Cr 5:12). Not all believers in a locality are automatically part of the church; some are still "unlearned" (1 Cr 14:16,23-25), and some may have been "put away" (1 Cr 5:5,13). These believers are in Christ, but they are not gathered to His Name. Although we are happy to welcome unbelievers and unlearned believers among us, we cannot receive them to the fellowship of the assembly—we do not "share" the gospel with the unbeliever, and we do not "share" the full Word of God with the unbaptized or unlearned believer.

Paul. In Ac 9:26, Paul tried to join the church in Jerusalem (Greek *peirazo*, he test a situation). He was refused. Note that the brethren were not required to receive him based on his own testimony. He could not be his own witness. Initial evidence of his fitness needed to come from a known and trusted source—in this case Barnabas—and later from the great change in his life. Today, letters of commendation (Rm 16:1; 2 Cr 3:1) serve this purpose. Notice that even the Lord Jesus did not expect people to accept His witness by itself; His witness was corroborated by John the Baptist, His Father, His works, and Moses (Jh 5:31-47).

The "Back Seat." At the Lord's Supper, the issue of reception becomes critical, for this is the only meeting where *all* must physically participate by breaking from the bread and drinking from the cup. When we break the bread and drink the cup, we show our fellowship with each other. The cup speaks of the blood, the basis of all our blessings, and the bread expresses our oneness as common members of Christ's body (1 Cr 10:16-17). Thus only at this meeting must there be clear demarcation between those adults who are *in* and those who are *outside* the assembly.

7. A Refuge from Sin and Permissiveness.

Discipline. An assembly disciplines its members for moral or doctrinal evil (e.g. 1 Cr 5; 1 Tm 1:20; 2 Tm 2:14-19). In the Scriptures, discipline is always intended to produce repentance and lead to restoration. Paul saw moral and doctrinal sins as leaven that would eventually permeate and affect the whole assembly, unless it was purged out (1 Cr 5:6; Gl 5:9). Discipline maintains the holiness of God's household, permits Him to bless the company, and allows the assembly to continue as a credible pillar of the truth. Discipline further may salvage the life of the sinning believer, and it causes others to fear. It may also lead a false professor to realize his true position.

8. A Refuge from a False Gospel.

The Pure Gospel. Local assemblies maintain the purity of the gospel. We depend on the Holy Spirit for guidance both in teaching believers and in preaching to unbelievers. We follow the pattern of public heralding (1 Cr 1:17-18,23). We call sinners to respond to the gospel, but wait God's time in salvation. We oppose altar calls, prewritten prayers, and weak gospel presentations like "The Four Spiritual Laws."

9. A Refuge from False Order.

Headship. Headship is the order that God has established in the universe to assure harmony, peace, and beauty in all of its operations. God has appointed Christ Head of everything (Ep 1:10)—the whole creation (Cl 1:21), angels (Ep 1:21-23), the "world to come" (Ep 1:21; Hb 2:5), and the church (Cl 1:18; 2:19). Because of this, Satan has always targeted headship for special attack.

The Assembly Uniquely Displays Headship. God designed assemblies to display headship not only to a world that denies it, but also to watching angels (1 Cr 11:10). Despite current pressures to conform to feminism, local assemblies continue to demonstrate headship by the uncovered head of the man and the covered head of the woman, and by the public role of the man and the public silence of the women (1 Cr 11:2-12; 14:34-35; 1 Tm 2:8-15). By preserving divine distinctions between the sexes—an audible role for men and a visible role for women--assemblies display the glory of headship for God's pleasure.

Conclusion. Let us remain faithful to the pattern, so that the Lord can say of us what He said to the church in Philadelphia: "Thou hast a little strength, and has kept My Word, and hast not denied My Name" (Rv 3:8). The true measure of an assembly lies not in its size, or numbers, or wealth, but in its faithfulness to the Lord and to His Word.