

What is The Assembly



*A Collection of sermons preached by
W. E. Best*

Distributed Freely by:

Spring Assembly of Christ

<http://springassemblyofchrist.org>

October 2014

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What Is The Assembly? -- Part 1

W.E. Best

“I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven” (Matt. 16:18, 19 NASB Update). “What Is The Assembly?” is our subject today and for the next several weeks.

In the midst of all the “winds of doctrine” blowing today, it takes a sincere desire and diligent study of Scripture to recognize God’s assembly. One must be taught exclusively by Scripture, therefore rejecting all man-made dogmas, opinions, and traditions of various religious groups. In a world where more than 20,000 religious denominations exist, one is forced to ask the question, How many qualify to be called the assemblies of Jesus Christ? This question calls for other questions. Does Jesus Christ add His sheep, when they are regenerated, to false assemblies?

“Children, it is the last hour, and just as you heard that antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have arisen; from this we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, in order that it might be shown that they all are not of us. But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and you all know” (I John 2:18-20 NASB). The main purpose of the Gospel of John is how to be saved. The main purpose of the first epistle of John is that you may know that you are saved. Note how many perfect tense verbs there are in the five chapters of I John. In I John 2:18, “children” refers to the children of God, not professing Christians.

Scripture teaches there are false christs, a false gospel, a false spirit, and a false church. Paul said to the Corinthians, “But I am afraid, lest as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds should be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ. For if one comes and preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted, you bear this beautifully” (II Cor. 11:3, 4 NASB). John said to the angel of the church in Ephesus, “I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan” (Rev. 2:9 NASB). Those added to the assembly in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost were “passive,” which means they had no choice in the matter. They were acted upon by the Spirit within them; therefore, as they were baptized, all that mattered to them was the fellowship with other believers.

There is another important question: Can God’s truth become obsolete (outmoded, or out of date)? True theology is relative to the Word of God. Thus, it is occupied in continuous, attentive, and obedient listening to the Word of God. Listening, unlike remembering, is always a thing of the present. Therefore, theological questions must be relative, not to the times, but to the eternal truth of God. That is why Christ told the

unsaved Jews, “He who rejects Me, and does not receive My sayings, has one who judges him; the word I spoke is what will judge him at the last day” (John 12:48 NASB). This is the same message, the same old message that is always a new message. Recently, a parent who had several children who were not Christians stated the following: I am a Christian, and I am thankful for that. I have the responsibility of bringing up these children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, and subjecting them to the teaching of God’s word on important issues, whether they are Christians or not. I can’t save my children or be assured that they will go to heaven. However, I may be able to save them from an awful judgment if I teach them things, and they abide by the teaching. They will not be as sinful, and their judgment and punishment will not be as great. There are degrees of punishment in hell, as well as degrees of reward in heaven. Proverbs said, “Train up a child in the way he should go, Even when he is old he will not depart from it” (Prov. 22:6 NASB). This does not mean that he will become a Christian.

This is timely question: Does not every believer have the right of private judgment? Private judgment must never be interpreted to mean unrestrained license. Private judgment must be controlled by the contents of Scripture, grammatically expressed. Some abuse the true concept of private judgment by saying, “A man has the right to be in the wrong.” That really brings up a serious question. Has man’s accountability to the Great Lawgiver been abrogated? Every person is responsible to God. What about philosophy? Paul said, “See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ” (Col. 2:8 NASB). What about conscience? Luke tells us about Paul’s statement before the Council (Sanhedrin). “And Paul, looking intently at the Council, said, Brethren, I have lived my life with a perfectly good conscience before God up to this day” (Acts 23:1 NASB). Conscience, to the Christian, is the practical judgment that one makes of himself and of his actions—what he should and should not do, and what he has and has not done—with reference to the judgment of God. However, the conscience is not so powerful that it cannot be made subservient to passion, self-interest, and abuse.

Conscience is the soul’s glass and the understanding’s light. The very term conscience imparts that there is some law by which conduct is tried and the error or rectitude of it is determined. Hence, the conscience void of offence toward God means a conscience is clear of transgression. In Acts 24, Paul was charged with the crime of leading people astray by his preaching and conduct. In view of this charge, the apostle said, “...I also do my best to maintain always a blameless conscience both before God and before men. Now after several years I came to bring alms to my nation and to present offerings; in which they found me occupied in the temple, having been purified, without any crowd or uproar. But there were certain Jews from Asia—who ought to have been present before you, and to make accusation, if they should have anything against me. Or else let these men themselves tell what misdeed they found when I stood before the Council, other than for this one statement which I shouted out while standing among them, For the resurrection of the dead I am on trial before you today” (Acts 24:16-21 NASB).

God-called men are not orators of acquired words, but witnesses of revealed facts. Paul knew he could not get human justice from religious Jews, but he was determined to state the facts. He went so far that he touched the subject of capital punishment. He said, "If then I am a wrongdoer, and have committed anything worthy of death, I do not refuse to die; but if none of those things is true of which these men accuse me, no one can hand me over to them. I appeal to Caesar" (Acts 25:11 NASB).

True believers, who are students of Scripture, know they are at a disadvantage today. Many of the so-called lawmakers are revealing their hatred for the God of the Holy Scriptures. They hate the eternal Son of God who is the way, the truth, and the life. Furthermore, they cannot take the statement, "No one can go to the Father except through Jesus Christ." It is wonderful to see that long-continued hardships and human injustices did not sour Paul's spirit. God ordains such trials for the manifestation of Christian character. Paul did not let Christians of those last days down, because he manifested the same certainty, dignity, and defense of Biblical principles before the human courts of his time. Paul put the law in its proper place. As for the temple, he honored it as the great type of God's eternal purpose. As for Caesar, the emperor had no subject as loyal as the apostle who rendered to Caesar the things that belonged to Caesar. What more can one ask of its citizens?

Christianity is not a product of God and man. There is no greater task for Christians than that of destroying a man's faith in his own religion. It is easier to argue a man out of anything other than out of his religious creed. He has often given up his home, friends, and life for his creed. Pride, policy, and fear bind many religionists to their own creeds. The purpose of Holy Scripture is to dispel ignorance, correct errors, and remove opposition.

Before leaving this particular mood of thinking, something needs to be said about the manifestation of the spiritual life. The spiritual life is not to be measured by being orthodox in some human creed. There are many heretics who are profound theologians in their particular religions. It is not how much knowledge one has concerning his religion, but what does he believe? It is not how regular one is in his attendance. The Scribes and Pharisees were faithful in attendance. Is it measured by an attachment to some particular minister? The answer is no, because Herod heard John the Baptist gladly (Mark 6:20). Is it conviction of sin? No. Simon believed and was baptized (Acts 8:12, 13), but he had not repented (Acts 8:21-23). The following statement was on a church marquee: "Jesus alone can save the world, but He cannot save the world alone." That is nothing but confusion twice confounded.

In giving spiritual life to the elect, God needs no help and neither does He use means in any creative act. Birth is neither the cause nor the beginning of life itself; it is the manifestation of life. James said, "In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we might be, as it were, the first fruits among His creatures" (James 1:18 NASB). In God's work of illumination, conviction, conversion, and sanctification, the Spirit uses the Word as means; but in the initial working of making

alive (quicken), God uses no means. Life always precedes birth, because the natural man is passive in regeneration. The natural man is not asleep; He is dead in trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1).

It is inconsistent to teach that life comes by the grace of the sovereign God, and then contend that one must meet what is called the terms of the gospel. The terms are to believe what one is not able to hear and confess what he has never heard. The Scriptures teach that the sinner cannot “come to Me [Christ]” (John 6:44), “hear My [Christ’s]word” (John 8:43, 47), and “understand them [spiritual things]” (I Cor. 2:14). The sinner is dead spiritually. “Can” and “cannot” are used in a different sense respecting spiritual conduct from what they are when speaking of physical things. To say “one can do better” means he could if he would, but it does not mean that he can do that which he has no disposition to do. It is proper to say the student can make better grades if he would try harder, but he cannot love God if the love of God has not been poured out in his heart. Physically, the Christian can and does sin; but spiritually, the believer cannot live in sin (I John 3:6, 9).

An unregenerate person cannot be born of God by his faith in Jesus Christ. Scripture teaches a person is passive when he is born of God. “The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born [has been born, gegennemenos, perfect passive participle nominative masculine singular of gennao] of the Spirit” (John 3:8 NASB). The statement “who has been born” is the translation of the inflected form of the verb gennao. The perfect tense is completed action with continuing results or completed action with a resulting state of being. The passive voice represents the subject as being acted upon by someone else. This is what the informed believer would call “eternal security,” because God always finishes what He starts (II Tim. 1:9). Therefore, Paul said to the Philippian saints, “For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus” (Phil. 1:6 NASB).

Assembly meetings are for the purpose of giving direction to the private life of believers, but they also must give guidance for the correct observance of our corporate life. One cannot talk about the authority of Scripture for his personal life, and ignore what it says about his assembly life.

The Christian must have a “rule” by which he seeks to live, and Scripture alone can give that rule. Thomas Goodwin said he had a rule by which he lived. When it came to major Biblical principles, he would not compromise. He stated that if one rejects some doctrine of an established religious denomination, he becomes an outcast. On the other hand, if he takes what is scriptural from many denominations, he will be criticized by all the denominations, because he will not conform to any man-made denomination. The fact is that the dissenter becomes an enemy of all man-made denominations. However, he pleases God because he seeks to become conformed to revealed (objective) truth.

Studying the works of the Puritans, plus a few sound doctrinal men of God subsequent to the Puritans, motivated me to publish the pamphlet HONORING THE TRUE GOD.

The first paragraph in the introduction plus the twelve named Man-Made Doctrines are convincing enough to demonstrate the apostate condition of our times.

What Is The Assembly? -- Part 2

W.E. Best

“I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church [assembly]; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven” (Matt. 16:18-19 NASB Update). We are answering these questions: (1) What is the assembly? (2) What is the kingdom? The Scripture passage that is quoted covers the very heart of the Bible.

There is no more support for the succession of the assembly/kingdom than there is for the succession of the apostles (I Cor. 9:1). The theory of the assembly/kingdom is without Biblical support. Assembly (church), ekklesia, and kingdom, basileia, are not synonymous terms. Christ distinguished between the assembly and kingdom by the fact that no keys were given to the assembly. The kingdom is future, occurring when Christ comes as King of kings and Lord of lords. The assembly is the appointed means of becoming heirs of the kingdom. James said, “Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the Kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?” (James 2:5 NASB). The distinction is clear—(1) “...I will build [progressive future tense Greek verb] My church [assembly]...” and (2) “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven...”, subsequent to the completed and perfected Bride (Matt. 16:18, 19 NASB). Christ is continuing to build His assembly. He will continue to do so until the last person that the Father gave to the Son in the eternal covenant of grace (Heb. 13:20, 21) has been brought into the ark of safety.

It is very important at this point of our study to see what has happened to national Israel. Subsequent to the chief priests and elders manifesting their opposition to Christ, the Lord Jesus said to them, “Truly I say to you that the tax-gatherers and harlots will get into the kingdom of God before you” (Matt. 21:31 NASB). In Matthew 21:43, Christ said, “Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you, and be given to a nation producing the fruit of it” (NASB). The original choice of one nation by God and the continued selection of a nation (Deut. 5, 6) in some sense identified with Abraham enables us to appreciate the reason why God confined the acceptance of the kingdom to one nation and ultimately gives it to one people from all nations. God is not through with Israel. In Romans 9, Israel’s past is the subject; Romans 10, Israel’s present; and Romans 11, Israel’s future. In Revelation 7, there will be 144,000 sealed from every tribe of Israel. There will also be many from every nation under heaven. Therefore, it is a logical sequence from the premises laid down that so long as one nation is chosen from many nations and the kingdom is covenanted by oath to that nation, it is impossible for other nations—in their national capacity—to be thus elected.

Prophecy does not predict a kingdom to exist between the first and second advents of Jesus Christ. If the grammatical sense of ekklesia and basileia is retained, it will be impossible to erect out of the ekklesia the predicted basileia. Spiritualizers of Scripture have tried, but there has been nothing but failure. Christ’s building of the assembly is a

process that began with Christ and His disciples, and it will continue until the last one is added who constitutes Christ's Bride. Peter said, "The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance" (II Pet. 3:9 NASB). The word "promise" in II Peter 3:4, 9, and 13 refers to Christ's coming, not salvation. The key to II Peter 3:9 is found in the words "patient toward you." These are the persons whom God would not allow to perish.

Christ's sheep cannot resist God's will. Paul said, "So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, FOR THIS VERY PURPOSE I RAISED YOU UP, TO DEMONSTRATE MY POWER IN YOU, AND THAT MY NAME MIGHT BE PROCLAIMED THROUGHOUT THE WHOLE EARTH. So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires. You will say to me then, Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?" (Rom. 9:16-19 NASB). God is not willing that any of those included in the eternal covenant of grace should perish, but He wills that they will come to repentance.

II Peter 3:9 and Romans 9:16-19 do not apply to all men without exception. What about the "vessels of wrath" (Rom. 9:20-22)? "To this doom they were also appointed" (I Pet. 2:8 NASB) and "were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation" (Jude 4 NASB). When God chose some, He passed by those He did not choose. Let us never forget that God's delays, from our perspective in time, do not spring from an unwillingness or impotence to perform.

Informed believers acknowledge that there has always been a witness for God through the local aspect of the assembly on earth since the time of Christ. Paul and Barnabas preached at Iconium (Acts 14). Their persecution did not discourage or restrain the apostles from performing their duty. This was the fulfillment of Acts 9:16—"For I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake" (NASB). In writing to Timothy, Paul refers to these very days of Satanic fury. "But you followed my teaching, conduct, purpose, faith, patience, love, perseverance, persecutions, and sufferings, such as happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium and at Lystra; what persecutions I endured, and out of them all the Lord delivered me! And indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (II Tim. 3:10-12 NASB). Amidst the strong opposition, the Lord's purpose was fulfilled not only in the lives of the servants, but also in the lives of the sheep who heard the preaching.

There is a curious paradox in the coming of the gospel to men. Paul said, "But thanks be to God, who always leads us in His triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place. For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life. And who is adequate for these things? For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God" (II Cor. 2:14-17 NASB). The apostle shared in Christ's victory. He avoided any reference to himself as a victor; the victory was Christ's. One may be humanly energetic without being Divinely

energized. The apostle is simply saying that the gospel and those who preach it are well-pleasing to God, whether the message is received or rejected.

The Greek word *ekklesia* means to be called out of this evil world. Christ said, "If [since] the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you" (John 15:18, 19 NASB). Since our study is restricted to the *ekklesia* that Jesus Christ is presently building, then we are confined to what the Savior is doing during the age of the new covenant, the covenant of grace.

In the New Testament, the word *ekklesia* is used 115 times. It is used in the following ways: (1) It is the assembly Christ is continuing to build (Matt. 16:18). The assembly began with Christ and His disciples, not at Pentecost. (2) Stephen used the word assembly when referring to the congregation in the wilderness (Acts 7). (3) The word assembly is used when speaking about a local discipline problem in Matthew 18:15-20. (4) Luke used the word assembly when speaking of the Ephesian mob (Acts 19:32, 39, 41). Therefore, assembly may refer to the foundation consisting of Christ and His disciples or to the totality of Christ's body (Eph. 5:22-33).

There are not two kinds of Christians, those whose interest is in the "invisible" aspect of the assembly, and those who are concerned for the visible aspect of the assembly. In the early assembly, there was no such thing as believers being uncommitted to the responsibilities of the local aspect of the assembly (Acts 2:41-47). Salvation is not the only thing that is essential. It is essential for one to become a part of the body of Christ; and having been regenerated, the local assembly is essential for fellowship, edification, and discipline.

It must be admitted that there are strange views on the subject of the assembly. However, that is a fact with every Biblical subject. For example, did Christ die for the visible or invisible assembly? If He died just for the visible assembly, then He died for Judas, Simon, and others who either have died or will die in their sins (John 17:12; Acts 8:8-25; John 8:24). Some professing Christians think being a member of the invisible aspect of the assembly eliminates any need for the local aspect. Others believe the invisible is made up of only the members of the visible. There are also others who think that being a member of the visible makes one a member of the invisible.

On the surface, such statements and questions may seem to be foolish and nonsensical. However, they are not as absurd as some might think. Answering the questions Biblically gives one a clearer understanding of the body of Christ. For example, is the "one body" of Christ visible or invisible? Paul said, "There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all" (Eph. 4:4-6 NASB). The unity of the body in eternity is the goal for which the local aspect of the assembly strives in time. All seven features of unity, according to the context, must be spiritual. Thus, the one baptism must be spiritual, but not in the sense

of referring to the new birth. It refers to the one baptism in the Spirit at Pentecost. Baptism in the Spirit applies to the invisible body of Christ. Baptism in water applies to the local assembly. If the one body is the local assembly, then local assembly membership would be essential to salvation. That is not true. Furthermore, since baptism in water is a prerequisite to local church membership, that would make water baptism essential to salvation. That is also not true. This demonstrates how far religionists will go with their heresy.

Before we leave the statement “baptism in the Spirit,” let us point out what the Greek text says about the subject. There are only seven references to baptism in the Spirit: Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33; Acts 1:5; 11:16; and I Corinthians 12:13. The first five of these references are prophetic. Look at what Luke says in Acts 1:4, 5—“And gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, Which, He said, “You heard of from Me; for John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with [in] the Holy Spirit not many days from now” (NASB). This was the fifth time the prophecy had been declared by Christ’s disciples. All five of the references pointed to the day of Pentecost (Acts 2).

Subsequent to Pentecost, Peter had to report his finding concerning Cornelius and the Gentile believers. The charge against Peter was that he lived among the Gentiles. One of the great Puritans said, “Men ahead of their time awaken envy and alarm.” The truth of that statement is experienced by every believer to some degree. Scripture represents the Jews as the repository for truth (Rom. 3:2). Israel had been taught that through her and her Messiah all nations would be blessed. However, due to prejudice, the believing Jews were slow to learn that the truth of the gospel, which came first to them, must go beyond them to the Gentiles. The same can be said concerning Pentecost. It was for the Gentiles, as well as the Jews.

The last reference to Pentecost is I Corinthians 12:13—“For by one Spirit we were all baptized [aorist passive indicative of baptidzo] into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink [aorist passive indicative of potidzo, infused or inspired with the same Holy Spirit] of one Spirit” (NASB). If the Holy Spirit is the Agent of this baptism, that would mean the Spirit baptized the members of the body into Himself. All other references represent Jesus Christ as the Agent who has baptized all the members of His body into the sphere of the Holy Spirit. Christians are not identified by names, creeds, or denominations, but by the possession and fruits of the Spirit. There are two “alls” in I Corinthians 12:13—“all” baptized and “all” made to drink. Both verbs are aorist tense which expresses punctiliar or point action in the indicative mood, and it is a snapshot of past action. The passive voice represents the subject as being acted upon by someone or something else which denotes the subject receiving the action. The indicative mood affirms the reality of the action. Both “alls” are of equal extent. Compare this with Romans 8:29 and 30 for a good Bible answer of God working out His eternal purpose by grace.

What Is The Assembly? -- Part 3

W.E. Best

“I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church [assembly]; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven” (Matt. 16:18-19 NASB Update).

The Greek noun *ekklesia* is a compound word made up of the preposition *ek*, meaning from or out from, and the verb *kaleo*, meaning to summon or to call out. The called-out assembly may be Israel (Acts 7:38), a political assembly (Acts 19:32, 41), a gathering of Christians for worship in a local or visible geographical setting (I Cor. 11:18), or the body of Christ in her universal or invisible sense (Matt. 16:18). This compound Greek noun is used 115 times in the New Testament—77 singular number and 38 plural number. (See the Greek, not English, concordance.)

Since our study is restricted to the *ekklesia* (assembly) that Jesus Christ is building, we are confined to what Jesus Christ is doing during the age of the new covenant of grace, the eternal covenant. In the Old Testament, two words are used to describe the people of God under the old economy: “congregation,” which denotes those who were qualified to assemble; and “assembly,” which describes a company actually meeting together at a particular time and in a particular place (Ex. 16:1-10; Num. 20:1-3; Deut. 12-17). In the New Testament, the word assembly (church) is used of both the totality of the elect at a certain time and in a certain place and the totality of those who have stepped out of time into eternity.

The unity of the body in eternity is the goal for which the local aspect of the assembly strives in time (Eph. 4:1-16). According to the context, all seven features of unity must be spiritual. Therefore, the “one baptism” must be spiritual, but not in the sense of referring to the new birth. It refers to the “one baptism” in the Spirit at Pentecost. Baptism in the Spirit applies to the invisible body of Christ. Baptism in water applies to the local or visible assembly. If the “one body” is the local assembly, then local assembly membership would be essential to salvation. Furthermore, since baptism is a prerequisite to local membership, that would make water baptism essential to salvation. Hopefully, everyone is beginning to see the importance of this study.

There are two questions that must be explored at this point in our study: (1) Does the term body always refer to the local assembly? (2) Is it wrong to use the word assembly (church) when speaking of the invisible body? As to the first question, if the answer is “no,” then one is compelled to believe in an invisible body. On the other hand, if the answer is “yes,” then everyone in the assembly has to be saved. Finally, if the reply is “all are saved,” then what about Judas and Simon Magus? As to the second question, Christ identified Himself with the assembly. He gave Himself for her; and during this age, He is calling out unto Himself the assembly which is His body. Membership in the

body of Christ (the invisible aspect of the assembly) is co-terminus with salvation, and this qualifies a person for membership in the local aspect of the assembly. (See Col. 1:19-29.) The body would be impossible without the Spirit of regeneration who unites its members to her common Head. The context determines the use of ekklesia and not the word that determines the use of the context. This is an important rule in Biblical exegesis.

It is a serious mistake to reduce the body of Christ to an institutional assembly containing both saved and lost. Three questions are in order for us to get a handle on the seriousness of the subject: (1) Is an assembly required to be in perpetual session to be called an assembly? (2) What would you call an unassembled assembly? (3) Can the members of a local assembly who cannot assemble (providentially hindered) be a part of the assembly? One must understand that the invisible aspect of the assembly never replaces the necessity of the visible aspect. Moreover, the local aspect must never be de-emphasized. The term body, when referring to God's assembly, is always singular in the New Testament, but the term assembly (church) is used both in the singular and in the plural forms.

The invisible and visible aspects of the assembly differ. They differ in nature, because one is a spiritual organism and the other is an organized institution. They also differ in formation. One is formed by the Holy Spirit in regeneration, and the other is by active consent of the regenerated. A Biblical example of the latter is given in Acts 9:26-31: "And when he [Paul] had come to Jerusalem, he was trying to associate with the disciples; and they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took hold of him and brought him to the apostles and described to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had talked to him, and how at Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus. And he was with them moving about freely in Jerusalem, speaking out boldly in the name of the Lord. And he was talking and arguing with the Hellenistic Jews; but they were attempting to put him to death. But when the brethren learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him away to Tarsus. So the church [assembly] throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and, going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase" (NASB). Although the invisible and visible differ in membership constituency, one contains only the saved. The other contains both saved and lost.

The invisible aspect of the assembly is a defense against institutional salvation. It not only protects the basic truth of union with Christ, but it guards against institutional idolatry. Where the visible assembly is stressed by some as a depository of grace, Christ is ignored as being the source of grace. Furthermore, the visible aspect of the assembly exists because the invisible finds expression in the visible aspects, as the soul of man finds expression in man's body. Therefore, the visible aspect of the assembly is to strive to be ideally what the invisible is in reality. Paul had that in mind when he said to the Roman Christians, "I URGE you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be

transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect. For through the grace given to me I say to every man among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each [a person born of the Spirit] a measure of faith” (Rom. 12:1-3 NASB).

Having closed the great doctrinal section of Romans, Paul takes up the practical part by appealing to his brothers in Christ. He could not have closed the doctrinal part of his letter on a higher note. “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! FOR WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, OR WHO BECAME HIS COUNSELOR? OR WHO HAS FIRST GIVEN TO HIM THAT IT MIGHT BE PAID BACK TO HIM AGAIN? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen” (Rom. 11:33-36 NASB).

God’s servants learn quickly that people find fault with what they do not understand. Thus, they stain the sovereign God’s character with their depraved thoughts and speeches, because they know not the One about whom they speak. Man’s understanding is not the measure of God’s justice. Furthermore, God’s freedom is absolute because His sovereignty is absolute. Election reveals the freeness of grace; reprobation manifests sovereignty. If all people were given grace, the freedom of God would never be known. On the other hand, if all were pardoned, the justice of God would never be known.

Beginning with Romans 12, we have the demonstration of God’s righteousness. A close investigation of the first eleven chapters of Romans will show righteousness needed, communicated, and vindicated. Now righteousness is to be demonstrated. Service is not self-effort, because it is the out-living of the in-living Christ. Therefore, the body is not to be presented to God the Father, because He is in heaven. It is not to be presented to Jesus Christ, because He has His own glorified body. The Christian is to present his body to the Holy Spirit who has come not only to regenerate, but to abide in the one made alive in Christ. The following things should be explored:

1. The fountain of service is the inward urge of the Holy Spirit motivated by the knowledge of condemnation, justification, sanctification, and glorification (Rom. 1-8).
2. There are three spheres of demonstration: (a) the assembly (Rom. 12:3-13), (b) the social (Rom. 12:14-21), and (c) the civil (Rom. 13:1-7).
3. There are three kinds of duties: (a) universal—to all Christians (Rom. 12:1, 2); (b) special—to some (Rom. 12:3-8); and (c) general—with respect to certain occasions (Rom. 12:9-21).

Jesus Christ was the dying Sacrifice that makes possible the living sacrifice that Christians are to make. Adequate power has been bestowed in regeneration. Sufficient motive has been brought to believers by justification, sanctification, and glorification to

induce such a sacrifice. It is wonderful that our bodies, which were once the vehicles of fleshly lusts, can now by grace be held as acceptable to God. The body is to be presented to the Holy Spirit. We are not to ask Him to infill us. He is in us by right of regeneration. We acknowledge His right by presenting ourselves once-for-all. Service is not for the business of making money, but it is for the purpose of making the Father known. Dedication of the body is an act, and the renewing of the mind is a process. Since the faculty of discernment functions faultily, there must be a continual renewing which strikes at the stagnation, complacency, and pride of achievement so often manifested. Televised religion is a demonstration of the apostate condition of our nation.

The invisible assembly is the vital principle. The visible assembly is the assembly presented in testimony. Although Christ was cast out of the world nearly 2,000 years ago, He has a place in His assemblies on the earth during this apostate age. He said, "For where two or three have gathered together in My name, there I am in their midst" (Matt. 18:20 NASB). Christ's presence is manifested by the doctrinal content of the message, not by the noise and fleshly activity of the service.

What Is The Assembly? -- Part 4

W.E. Best

“I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church [assembly]; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven” (Matt. 16:18-19 NASB Update).

The unity of the body of Christ in eternity is the goal for which the local aspect of the assembly strives in time (Eph. 4:4-6). That is why the terms body and assembly are not used synonymously. In reference to the assembly, body is always singular when used in the New Testament, and assembly is used both in the singular and in the plural forms. They differ in both nature and formation. By nature, the body is a spiritual organism, and the assembly is an organized institution. Furthermore, the body is passive in regeneration, and the assembly is formed by the active consent of the regenerated. Scripture settles every dispute. In regeneration, the sinner is passive: “The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit” (John 3:8 NASB). In conversion, which is the result of regeneration, the person proves by his life that he has been made a new creature in Christ (II Cor. 5:17). “And when he [Paul] had come to Jerusalem, he was trying to associate with the disciples; and they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple” (Acts 9:26 NASB).

The value of both the invisible and visible aspects of the assembly is evident. The invisible is a defense against institutional salvation. It protects the basic truth of union with Christ and guards against institutional idolatry. Where the visible assembly is stressed by some as a depository of grace, Christ is ignored as being the source of grace. The visible exists for the sake of the invisible because the invisible finds expression in the visible, as the soul of man does through the body. The visible is to strive to be ideally what the invisible is really. Therefore, the invisible is the vital principle; the visible is the assembly presented in testimony. Although Jesus Christ was cast out of the world nearly 2,000 years ago, He has a place in His assembly on the earth during this age of the assembly. In Christ’s second reference to His assembly, He said, “Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven. For where two or three have gathered together in My name, there I am in their midst” (Matt. 18:19, 20 NASB).

Christ was not only given to be head over all things to the assembly, but the assembly was given to Christ. Paul said, “And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church [assembly], which is His body, the fulness of Him who fills all in all” (Eph. 1:22, 23 NASB). Paul also said, “Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church [assembly], He Himself being the Savior of the body. But as the church [assembly] is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to

their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church [assembly] and gave Himself up for her; that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church [assembly] in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she should be holy and blameless. So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church [assembly], because we are members of His body. FOR THIS CAUSE A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER, AND SHALL CLEAVE TO HIS WIFE; AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH. This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church [assembly]. Nevertheless let each individual among you also love his own wife even as himself; and let the wife see to it that she respect her husband" (Eph. 5:22-33 NASB).

The same principles typified by Adam and Eve are seen operating between Christ and His assembly. The following are comparisons between Eve and the assembly: (1) The creation and purpose of both were to be brides. (2) The institution by which man and woman and Christ and His assembly are made one is in marriage. (3) As the woman is betrothed to man, Christians are betrothed to Christ. Therefore, as soon as the Divine declaration was made that Adam should not be alone, we are told about the Divine operation (Gen. 2:18, 21, 22). From a rib, God made woman. The Divine presentation came when the Lord God brought the woman to the man and they became one flesh. The woman became the completion of the man. Completion works both ways, woman's fulfillment as well as the man's.

As soon as the assembly was announced, the foundation upon which she is continuing to be built was proclaimed. Christ said, "And I also say to you that you are Peter [Petros, nominative, masculine, singular of petros, meaning a rock or stone], and upon this rock [petra, locative, singular, feminine of petra, a massive rock or stone] I will build [oikodomeso, progressive future, active, indicative, first person, singular of oikodomeo, which means to build up or complete] My church [assembly]..." (Matt. 16:18 NASB). The best distinction of the difference between Petros and petra is the difference between a small rock and the Rock of Gibraltar. When reference is made to the Rock of Gibraltar, one thinks of strength and endurance that can be relied on. Therefore, no amount of debate can make Peter (a small rock) the foundation of the assembly, as Roman Catholics teach. Jerome (340-420 A.D.), the chief preparer of the Vulgate version of the Bible, said, "Christ has founded His church on this rock, and it is from this rock that the apostle Peter has been named." I am sure that Jerome knows better now; but the word petra, which is found fifteen times in the New Testament, is never used when speaking of Peter.

It is important to observe that the Greek noun Petros is masculine gender and petra is feminine gender. The feminine term indicates what made Peter a rock. That was, of course, not his confession, but the Divine revelation from which that confession originated. The revelation was directly from God the Father. Subsequent to Peter's confession, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16 NASB), Christ

said to him, “Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 16:17 NASB). That revelation, however, was not intended for Peter alone. All the elect of God given to Christ share in it, and due to this revelation, all confess Peter’s confession.

There are three major opinions concerning the statement “I also say to you that you are Peter...” (Matt. 16:18 NASB). One makes it Peter himself, but this is questioned by some who say Peter could not be the rock of the church, because he is called “Satan” (Matt. 16:21-23). Another view makes the rock Peter’s confession. They say Peter’s confession rested on the Person of Christ as its foundation. The third view shows the difference between Peter (rock) and Christ’s own Person as the Massive Living Rock.

Paul demonstrated to the Corinthians that they were following the same mistakes the Israelites made. God’s people should learn and then live, not live and learn. Revelation is given to save saints the bitter expense of some experiences. The Bible is the Book filled with the wisdom of yesterday. Therefore, Paul said to the Corinthians, “For I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea; and all ate the same spiritual food; and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them, and the rock was Christ. Nevertheless with most of them God was not well-pleased; for they were laid low in the wilderness. Now these things happened as examples for us, that we should not crave evil things, as they also craved. And do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written, THE PEOPLE SAT DOWN TO EAT AND DRINK, AND STOOD UP TO PLAY. Nor let us act immorally, as some of them did, and twenty three thousand fell in one day. Nor let us try the Lord, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the serpents. Nor grumble, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer. Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, that you may be able to endure it. Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry” (I Cor. 10:1-14 NASB). Note that John closes his First Epistle with similar words: “Little children, guard yourselves from idols” (I John 5:21 NASB).

The apostle Paul appeals to the experiences of the fathers. In the first part of I Corinthians 10, the apostle revealed their indulgence of liberty which impaired and impeded Israel’s spiritual progress. In the last part of the chapter, their indulgence may be a reactionary example that will harm others. Therefore, in I Corinthians 10, the important thing to see is that Jesus Christ is the eternal Rock of God’s covenant of grace (Heb. 13:20, 21). The Christian life is never represented as an ever ascending scale, because it will always appear as a zigzag line, indicating our falling and rising again. The Psalmist said, “Thou hast placed our iniquities before Thee, Our secret sins in the light of Thy presence” (Ps. 90:8 NASB). “Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me and know my anxious thoughts; And see if there be any hurtful way in me, And

lead me in the everlasting way” (Ps. 139:23, 24 NASB). God’s people are continually warned against temptation to evil.

The statement “the Rock was Christ [the Messiah]” (I Cor. 10:4 NASB) stands out in Holy Scripture like the Rock of Gibraltar does when compared with a rock pebble the size of a marble. Peter (Petros) is not the Massive Living Rock, Jesus Christ; but he is one of the sheep for whom Jesus Christ came into this sinful world. “One of the two who heard John speak, and followed Him, was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. He found first his own brother Simon, and said to him, We have found the Messiah (which translated means Christ). He brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him, and said, You are Simon the son of John; you shall be called Cephas (which translated means Peter [petros, a rock])” (John 1:40-42 NASB). Christ told Peter, “Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God’s interests, but man’s” (Matt. 16:23 NASB). There is no doubt that Peter thought his marble-size rock dropped to the size of a grain of sand.

A repentant spirit occurs in Christ’s sheep who have been born of God because the sheep recognize His Headship when they are corrected. As Head of His assembly, Christ has the sole right to give laws and institute ordinances for the called-out ones to observe. His will is the supreme guide of His people. His word is their code of laws. His glory is their ultimate end. Hence, no human hierarchy has any jurisdiction over the called-out ones by grace.

Local assembly authority is neither self-created nor self-assumed. It is derived from the Head of each assembly. Those who administer such authority are to be governed by the instruction of their Head, Jesus Christ. Members of each local assembly have no right to make laws of their own. Furthermore, they must never speak or act arbitrarily.

Every Christian’s motto (guiding principle) should be, “...let God be found true, though every man be found a liar...” (Rom. 3:4 NASB). Does God act arbitrarily? God’s laws are above all other laws. God’s laws are not subject to any laws higher than His laws because no man-made laws will ever exceed God’s laws. The reason is very simple. Isaiah said, “Let the wicked forsake his way, And the unrighteous man his thoughts; And let him return to the LORD, And He will have compassion on him; And to our God, For He will abundantly pardon. For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Neither are your ways My ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways, And My thoughts than your thoughts” (Is. 55:7-9 NASB).

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