

Articles by Andrew Stenhouse

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Meeting as a New Testament Church Today

Have you ever wondered what it would have been like to meet with the first Christians?

One of the greatest blessings this side of heaven is to gather with others who take God and His Word seriously. We are a group of believers saved by grace through faith in Christ and His finished work (Rom. 10:9-10) who meet around the Lord Jesus by faith, seeking to follow only the directions given in the New Testament. We believe that the church is God's idea. Christians do not meet in congregations merely because it is desirable or helpful, but because the Lord has ordained it (1 Thess. 2:14).

Our Lord Himself first spoke of the church when He declared that He was its builder and would establish it on a sure foundation--Himself (Mt. 16:18). He also first spoke concerning the local church, to which matters of right relations between believers might be referred (Mt. 18:17).

There may be some things about a gathering like this that would be different to you. We would appreciate a few moments to explain how we meet and why.

By the way, there are many who meet like this.

You may have heard of names like George Müller, the great man of faith; H. A. Ironside, the famous Bible expositor; Jim Elliot, the intrepid martyr of Ecuador; or W. E. Vine, the author of the well-known Dictionary of Expository Words. These, like thousands of others

worldwide, met simply according to the pattern found in the New Testament.

Sometimes such groups are referred to as "Brethren" (due to the lack of division between "clergy" and "laity" in their meetings), but we desire to gather simply as Christ's ones in His name,¹ recognizing no names that would divide God's people.² To be gathered in His name is to meet by His authority, submitting to His Lordship, and following His Word.

Does the New Testament provide a pattern?

If you suggested changing any other doctrine--salvation by faith in Christ, the deity of the Lord Jesus, or the inspiration of Scripture, for example--it would invite strong reaction from Bible-believing churches. But somehow many feel we are free to redesign the church any way it suits us. Yet we have no more right to make a new way of meeting than a new way of salvation.

"At the very outset of the New Testament it is striking that the Lord Jesus and the apostles labored to establish only one institution--the local church.³ Paul stated, 'As a wise master builder, I have laid the foundation, and another buildeth thereon. But let every man take heed how he buildeth thereon' (1 Cor. 3:10). The local church lies at the heart of God's program today. Indifference to the doctrine of the church is certainly indifference to the plan of God."⁴ Francis Schaeffer writes, "The church did not sit there as a group of believers with no form. The New Testament form is commanded by God. These norms are not arbitrary--they are God's form for the institutional, organized church and they are to be present in the twentieth century as well as in any

century."⁵ A truly scriptural assembly should be composed only of true believers.

By this we mean 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" (Gal. 3:26). Unconverted people cannot truly participate in worship or other holy activities of the church, nor could they be expected to support its testimony by holy living. Christians are exhorted not to be unequally yoked with unbelievers (2 Cor. 6:14-18), although we should do good to them and share the gospel with them.

What about baptism?

The word "baptism" is the English form of the Greek word baptizo, which means to submerge or immerse. All converted people in New Testament times were baptized before taking their place in a local church (see Acts 2:41; 8:12). Christ had commanded that this should be done (Mt. 28:19). The same pattern is observed by scriptural assemblies today. Converts should be taught that baptism is the symbol of their being buried with Christ, and rising (as He rose) to walk "in newness of life" (Rom. 6:1-11).

Christ is the gathering center.

Although a local church is a gathering of like-minded believers, no fellowship based on people will work.

"Truly our fellowship," said John, "is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ" (1 Jn. 1:3). Matthew 18:20 states: "For where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them." It is so easy to be distracted from Christ, to find ourselves gathering to a preacher, a set of doctrines, a sacrament, or form of

church government. This is very different from being gathered to Christ. We want to recognize His headship (Col. 1:18) in our assembly practically. We believe He deserves this, for it is His church: "Christ also loved the church, and gave Himself for it" (Eph. 5:25).

A New Testament assembly takes the Bible as authoritative and complete.

We believe firmly in the historic doctrines of the church. However, rather than subscribing to man-made creeds, rules, and constitutions, we find the Word of God to be the only infallible statement of Christian faith and practice (2 Tim. 3:16). The Scriptures should be appealed to directly in a gracious and humble spirit (2 Tim. 2:25) to settle all disputes, give directives to the assembly, and provide the basis for all public and private ministry.

The Holy Spirit represents Christ on earth.

Of course, it is not enough to recognize the truths of Scripture if we do not act on them. Many claim to be Bible-believing churches, and we thank God for that. But we must seek also to be a Bible-obeying church by the work of the Spirit of God in us. It is of the utmost importance that the Holy Spirit be given His place in the local assembly. His power is the only power for worship, ministry, or evangelism. It is easy to displace Him by substituting human arrangements. It is common in many congregations to have one man to preside as minister or pastor, with activities under his control. However the Spirit is to direct the believers in their meetings (1 Cor. 12 & 14).

For the guidance of the local church, elders are appointed by the Spirit.

From Acts 20:17-38, we see that the terms "elders" (v. 17) and "overseers" (bishops, see margin, v. 28) are used of the same individuals and are applied to those who "take heed...to the flock" (v. 28). In other words, elders, overseers (or bishops), and pastors (or shepherds) are all describing the same workers in the church. Elder emphasizes their maturity; overseer emphasizes their responsibility; shepherd emphasizes their ministry--to heed, lead, and feed the local flock. These men (the words are always used in the plural) are to fulfill the qualifications given in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. Our elders are to be respected, prayed for, and obeyed (Heb. 13:7, 17).

There is no difference in value between men and women, but there are distinct roles.

The work of Christ has removed all human distinctions of privilege (Gal. 3:28). And every believer, whether male or female, is a priest to God (Heb. 13:15). As holy priests (1 Pet. 2:5) and royal priests (1 Pet. 2:9), we can worship and witness as much as we desire.

But as in the home, so also in the church, men and women are given distinct roles. Church order, like chronological or alphabetical order, has nothing to do with importance. It has been established by God so "all things [are] done decently and (according to the) order" (1 Cor. 14:40).

Men are to come to church meetings prepared to function publicly, representing God to the assembly in the ministry of the Word as the Spirit leads (1 Pet. 4:10-11) or representing the assembly to God in prayer and praise, doing it carefully so everyone can add "Amen" (1 Cor. 14:16). The women, free to pray and

worship the Lord all they wish, must however do it silently (as do the men when they are not being moved by the Spirit to speak). Thus the women have free access worship as the men do, but are not to reverse the divine order by speaking publicly in the church (1 Cor. 14:34; 1 Tim. 2:11-12).

Why do the women wear the head covering?

One of the ministries given to women in the church is that of being stewards of the coverings, somewhat like the Gershonites in the Old Testament (Num. 4:24-26). God's glory is to be seen alone in the local church. In order to do this, the men remain uncovered by not having long hair and by removing any head coverings, because the man is "the image and glory of God" (1 Cor. 11:7). Any covering would symbolically veil God's glory.

There are, however, two competing glories in the church. "The woman is the glory of the man" (1 Cor. 11:7). And "if a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her" (1 Cor. 11:15). Because there are two symbolic glories to be covered, there must be two coverings. The first covering (Gk., peribolaion) is the woman's long hair (v. 15b) to hide the glory of the man (the woman herself). The second covering (Gk., katakalupto) is to hide her glory--her hair. In this way, God's authority is declared, men are reminded by this that their glory is to be hidden in the church, and the angels are instructed (1 Cor. 11:10).

The Lord's Supper occupies a central place.

As the early Christians did, we come together on the first day of each week to "break bread" (Acts 20:7). Being a divine appointment, it should never be relegated to a secondary place, or treated as a matter of

occasional obedience. It is to be a time of calling our Lord to mind and declaring His death for us. It is observed not as a sacrament administered by a clergyman, but as described in 1 Corinthians 11. The prime purpose of this time is not to minister to other believers, as in other meetings of the church, but to minister to the heart of God through appropriate reading of scriptures, worshipful hymns, and prayers expressing to God the worthiness of our Saviour.

What about membership?

Strictly speaking, the only church membership spoken about in the New Testament refers to the act of placing a new believer into the Body of Christ. This happens the moment one is saved (1 Cor. 12:27; Eph. 5:30). We have no member's list, but do receive into fellowship those whom Christ has already received (Rom. 15:7; 16:1-2). The whole assembly is happy to receive all who i) confess Jesus Christ as personal Saviour and Lord; and ii) have a consistent Christian life and testimony.

Being received into this fellowship means you are ready to embrace the privileges of local church life and willing to accept your responsibilities with us. These include regular attendance at the meetings of the church (Acts 2:42; Heb. 10:25), the exercise of your gift for the upbuilding of others (1 Pet. 4:10), submitting to one another, especially in obedience to the elders (Heb. 13:17), and sharing as the Lord enables you in the financial needs of the assembly (1 Cor. 16:1-2; 2 Cor. 9:7) as an act of worship (Heb. 13:16). Funds are not solicited, especially not from unbelievers (3 Jn. 1:7).

But there is so much more!

Obviously in a paper like this it is not possible to deal fully with all the issues involved in church life. But as we seek the truth in God's Word, the Holy Spirit delights to show us more. The Apostle Paul stated the two-fold wonder of God's blessings to the human race: "To me, who am less than the least of all the saints, this grace was given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make all see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ" (Eph. 3:8-9). May the Lord help us all to enter more fully into these twin treasures: what we have in the cross of Christ and what we have in the church of Christ.

Endnotes:

1. Mt. 18:20; 1 Cor. 5:4; see Mt. 23:8 as to who the "brethren" really are--every true believer in Christ. 2. See 1 Cor. 1:10-15; 1 Cor. 3:3-5 3. See 1 Cor. 4:17; 7:17; 11:16; 14:33; 14:34 4. Uplook, Jan. 1998, pp. 27-28 5. F. Schaeffer, *The Church at the End of the 20th Century*, Downers Grove, IL, InterVarsity Press, 1970, p. 66 Much of this material adapted from A Scriptural Assembly by Andrew Stenhouse.

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