

A Believer's Bible Booklet



The Meeting of the Church

THE MEETING OF THE CHURCH

William J. McRae

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Believers Chapel
6420 Churchill Way
Dallas, Texas 75230

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THE MEETING OF THE CHURCH

The insights of children are often far beyond their years. Their honesty sometimes staggers me. I heard of a young lad who once accompanied his father to their Sunday night church service. It was a warm summer evening. The service seemed boring and dull. The message was addressed more to those who were absent than to those present. The order of the service was rigidly routine - it never changed, and somehow he never got involved. Finally, the benediction startled him into consciousness. He sighed in relief and moved toward the back of the church with his father. There on the wall hung a beautifully embossed bronze plaque. He had often wondered what it was for, and this time he asked his father. Proudly, his daddy told him it was in memory of those who died in the service. A moment later, the boy innocently inquired: "Which one? The morning or the evening service?"

Recently a young man stood up in a large meeting in the music hall in Houston to ask Hal Lindsey, "I've tried the church, but did not find what I needed. What shall I do?"

A few years ago a prominent speaker with a nation-wide Christian youth organization predicted that in 10 years the local church would no longer exist. He said that it is outdated, that its time of usefulness is past, and that it no longer is meeting the pressing needs of twentieth century people.

Such disgust, disillusionment and despair with the traditional church and its meetings fill the air in most circles today. Yet I cannot imagine anything that could be more dynamic or exciting, more meaningful, relevant or edifying for me as a Christian, and more glorifying to the Lord than a church meeting - New Testament style.

What are the features of such a meeting? From the profile etched on the pages of your Bible, there are several that are so clearly presented that you will wonder how you could ever have missed them. But what are they?

I. IT WAS A MEETING ON THE EVENING OF THE FIRST DAY OF EVERY WEEK.

This is well substantiated, not only by the New Testament writers, but by extra-biblical sources as well.

A. It was on the first day of the week.

There is great significance to the setting aside of this day. It was the day of our Lord's glorious resurrection. The observance of this day was a silent resurrection. The observance of this day was a silent symbol of the passing of the old covenant with its Sabbath observance, and the establishment of the new covenant. The earliest indication of this change of days comes from the pen of Paul, who writes:

On the first day of every week let each one of you put aside and save, as he may prosper, that no collections be made when I come.*

1 Cor. 16:2

A further indication comes from the practice of the Christians in Troas, of whom we read:

And on the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul began talking to them, intending to depart the next day, and he prolonged his message until midnight.

Acts 20:7

*This and all subsequent verses are taken from the New American Standard Bible.

According to the Didache and Justin Martyr, it was customary for the early church to meet on the first day of the week. Because of the significance of the day and the apostolic practice of observing the day, we conclude that it is still the appropriate day for the church to gather for its meeting.

B. It was on the first day of every week.

Initially there appears to have been a daily gathering of the believers (Acts 2:46), but gradually the pattern of a weekly meeting emerged.

Although this is only implied in Acts 20:7, it is explicit in the Greek text of I Cor. 16:2, and is expressed in the revision which reads: "On the first day of every week."

It may be startling to many of us to learn that this was commonly acknowledged by many of our revered leaders of the past. They argued for a weekly observance of the Lord's Supper. John Calvin, the great Presbyterian, wrote in his Institutes of the Christian Religion that the Lord's Supper should be observed "very frequently and at least one in a week." The founder of Methodism, John Wesley, led his followers every Sunday in observing the Lord's Supper. From the pen of the Baptist Church's greatest preacher, C. H. Spurgeon, came these words: "Shame of the Christian church that she should put it off to once a month. They who once knew the sweetness of each Lord's day celebrating the Lord's Supper will not be content to put it off to less frequent seasons."

Apostolic practice is apostolic precept (I Cor. 14:37). Because of the significance of the first day of the week, and because it was the practice of the apostolic church to meet the first day of every week to remember the Lord, we conclude that it is to be a continuing practice of the Christian church.

C. It was in the evening of the first day of every week.

Again we turn to the church in Troas for attestation (Acts 20:7). There Paul preached until midnight. He could hardly have started at eleven o'clock in the morning! The indication is that the worshippers met in the evening, and there is broad support for this from extra-biblical literature. This was a convenient time for members of the Gentile churches, who were often not their own masters, and thus were not free during the day. I do not think there is any special significance to meeting in the evening. It was really a matter of convenience for the first century church.

By the way, it was probably Sunday night, not Saturday night, when they met. At least this is true at Troas. Luke in both his Gospel and the Book of Acts uses Roman time, which marked a day from midnight to midnight. If the first day of the week began at midnight, the evening of the first day of the week would be Sunday night--not Saturday night.

D. It was only in the evening of the first day of every week.

After the early days of the Book of Acts, this was the only time the believers met together. They did not have a large number of different services. They had a weekly meeting of the church. What a revolutionary idea!

The traditional weekly church calendar lists a full schedule of meetings. Remember the last time you heard someone boast, "There is something going on every night at our church"? This may be its greatest weakness. We have separated the elements of the New Testament church meeting, and set up an individual meeting for each component. As a result, we have a prayer meeting, Bible study meeting, evangelistic meeting, Lord's Supper meeting, etc.

Some meetings are unbiblical. For believing men and women to gather together to be taught the Word of God by a Christian woman would be, I believe, to convene an unbiblical meeting. It would be contrary to the Scriptures (I Cor. 14:34; I Tim. 2:11-14).

Other meetings are non-biblical. The Sunday School for children, the Ministry of the Word service, the Gospel Meeting, the Boys' Brigade, and the Young People's Fellowship are, I believe, non-biblical. That is, such services have no precedent in the New Testament. They were not part of the apostles' practice. They just did not exist in the early church. However, they are in no way contradictory to the Scriptures and they do not oppose any principles of the New Testament for the church. Surely we are at perfect liberty to hold any such meetings that will contribute toward the saving of souls and the edifying of the people of God.

However, there is one service that is biblical. It is the meeting of the church as it was practiced by the apostles and described in the epistles. In Believers Chapel this service is held in the evening of the first day of every week. This service is the meeting of the church, which will surprise some of you who have been attending the Sunday morning Ministry of the Word services for months. You thought you were attending our church meeting, but that is not so. This Sunday morning service is part of our outreach. Here we teach the Word of God and preach the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ to our friends in the community.

Our Sunday evening service at Believers Chapel is the meeting of the church. It is a service like the meeting of the early Christian. In it we attempt to follow the New Testament practices, precepts and principles laid out for the church meeting by the apostles.

"What kind of service do you have here on Sunday night?" "Why?" These are among the most frequent questions I am asked. In response I wish to explain our service and demonstrate the biblical basis for our practice. Some have been attending the chapel for months or years, and are very interested in becoming a part of the body. Our prayerful objective here is to encourage participation in our church meeting.

But what exactly are the characteristics of such a church meeting? There is no more intimate glimpse into what the first century church was like when it gathered together than the picture in I Cor. 14:26-34. Here the apostle begins:

What is the outcome then, brethren? When you assemble...

v. 26

This phrase "when you assemble" anticipates the coming together of the church for its meeting. This same verb occurs five times in Chapter 11 in the context of their coming together as a church to observe the Lord's Supper (vs. 17, 18, 20, 33, 34).

From the critically central passage, I Cor. 14:26-34, a careful student will derive several more features of the New Testament church meeting.

II. IT WAS A MEETING WITHOUT ANY PROFESSIONAL MINISTRY.

When you assemble, each one has a psalm has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation...

v.26

The inspired writer says "each one has..." He does not say the pastor has a hymn. He does not say the elders or the deacons have a doctrine. He addresses neither the clergymen nor the ordained. He says: "each one."

Paul is surely not suggesting that every individual always contributed something to the church meeting. But he is telling us that each one was free to contribute a doctrine, a hymn, a revelation or any other of the features of the church meeting.

In the early church there was no professional ministry. It arose in the second century with the monarchical bishop. In the New Testament church there was no such thing because every believer was in the ministry (Eph. 4:12).

Read your New Testament carefully. You will discover there are only four offices in a local church:

- 1) There is the office Headship. This is occupied by Christ who alone is the Head of each local church (Eph. 1:22, Col. 1:18).
- 2) There is also the office of elder or bishop (I Tim. 3:1). These terms refer to the same person as is clear from Acts 20:17 and 28. The Scriptures indicate there was a plurality of elders in each local church (Acts 20:17, 14:23, 11:30, Phil. 1:1). and that they were appointed by the Holy Spirit (Acts 20:28) and then recognized by the church (I Thess. 5:12), to shepherd (Acts 20:28) and to protect the flock (Acts 20:29-31).
- 3) The third office is that of deacon (I Tim. 3:8, Phil. 1:1). These were the men who assisted the elders.
- 4) the only other office in a local church is that of priest. Remarkably, every believer in a local church occupies this office (I Peter 2:4).

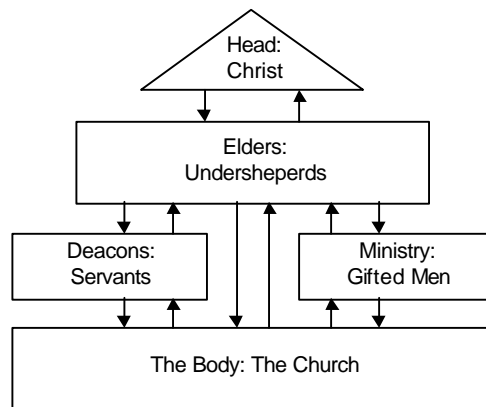
There is no office of pastor, nor is any single person in the position of being head of a local church.

In writing to the Philippians the apostle indicates the organization of the church in his salutation, where he writes:

Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi including the overseers (elders or bishops) and deacons.

Phil. 1:1

Dr. S. Lewis Johnson, Jr. has diagrammed the structure of a New Testament local church as follows:



When the local church gathered together to worship, it gathered as a "royal priesthood." There was no officialdom. Every believer was a priest, all on the same level, free to contribute to the meeting.

Following the pattern and example of the New Testament church, we at Believers Chapel recognize no professional ministry in the church meeting. Every worshipper is on exactly the same level. Since we are all priests, each one, individually, may approach God directly and worship. Every man (because of the limitation of v. 34) is free to contribute a hymn, a prayer, a reading of Scripture, a word of teaching or exhortation. He is free to give thanks for the bread or the cup in the observance of the Lord's Supper. This is the privilege and responsibility of the priesthood composed of all believers.

Look at our verse again. Here we can deduce a third feature.

III. IT WAS A MEETING WITHOUT ANY SETTLED FORMAT.

Isn't that the impression you receive from verse 26? Nowhere is there given any order of service for this meeting. Barclay, in his commentary on the verse notes: "There was clearly no settled order at all", and Calvin acknowledges that in the meeting of the New Testament church there was spontaneity. There is no biblical structure or liturgy for this service.

It must have been exciting to attend this type of meeting. You never knew what was going to happen next. A person may have begun the service by requesting a psalm to be sung. Then you would wonder what would be next. Will it be another psalm? Will someone pray? Perhaps five or six will pray one after the other. One of the brethren could give a word of exhortation from the Scriptures. Or will it be the exposition of a passage? It may be a word of testimony or a prayer request. Perhaps someone will give thanks for the bread. There was no possibility of boredom because everyone was involved.

Any similarity between this and the traditional church service today is purely coincidental!

Following the pattern of the New Testament, we at Believers Chapel, however, wish to have this type of service when we gather for the church meeting. In our Sunday evening service there is absolutely no settled format.

One of the remarkable tendencies in the church today is to put itself back under the legal system of the Old Testament. This is evidence by the existence of a professional ministry, the dedicated sanctuaries, and the religious calendar. To this list add the liturgy, the order of service or the format. All such features are carried over from the Judaism of the Old Testament.

One of the simplest orders of service is the meeting in which the saints focus only upon the person and death of Christ before the bread and cup are passed. After the emblems, believers are permitted to minister regarding the resurrection or present ministry of our Lord or to exhort the other believers.

In a recent issue of a Christian magazine this order of service was strongly advocated. The writer said:

In such a meeting the ministry, fellowship, and worship are centered on the Lord Jesus Christ and are under the leadership of the Holy Spirit. The introduction of evangelism or intercession is out of place. Personal testimony or experience, however soul-stirring it might be to the speaker, should be avoided unless it contributes to the contemplation of Christ.

When the Lord's Supper has been observed and the worship and ministry portion has been concluded, a suitable prayer could close the meeting. At this time all necessary announcements, business reports, correspondence and other assembly affairs may be presented. While this detail is not spelled out in Scripture, it seems only fitting that we don't allow the temporal affairs of the assembly to intrude on the contemplation of our blessed Lord whom we gather together to worship. "This do in remembrance of Me."

This statement shows a remarkable misunderstanding of New Testament principles. How right he is that no such detail is given in Scripture! His system is all humanly devised. I find it almost unbelievable that one would speak of "the leadership of the Holy Spirit" in a meeting where we have spelled out what can be done, and when it can be done. Could there be a better illustration of quenching the Spirit than this? The writer quotes our Lord's words: "This do" and applies them to the meeting. This careless bit of exegesis has led to great confusion. Isn't the Lord here speaking of the bread and cup and not of the entire meeting? In the meeting of the church the believers did remember Him in this fashion, but that is not all they did. Note carefully that it was not exclusively a worship meeting.

Do not misunderstand me. I am not saying that such a meeting is wrong. Surely there is liberty for such a worship service if it is so desired. But a purely worship service is not the New Testament meeting of the church. In the New Testament meeting of the church there was no settled format whatsoever.

From this simple order of service there is an ascending scale up to the most sophisticated liturgies. Behold the legalism of the Old Testament economy in the New Testament church! It is spiritual immaturity which finds security in such structures, whether they be in the meeting of the church or in our daily Christian lives.

In the apostolic churches there was no format. There was freedom-no structure, no set routine at all. But how did one know when to participate? Who was to take part next? What was he to do? This leads us to the fourth feature of the meeting of the church.

IV. IT WAS A MEETING SUPERINTENDED BY GOD THE HOLY SPIRIT.

What could be more appropriate? You will remember that our Lord, before His return to heaven, promised to send "another Comforter," the Holy Spirit, to represent Him here on earth. While Christ is the Head of the church, the Holy Spirit is the vicar of Christ. When the early church met together for its meeting, who was better able to superintend the service than the Holy Spirit-the representative of the church's Head?

There are several indications of this ministry of the Holy Spirit in our New Testament. For example:

But if a revelation is made to another who is seated, let the first keep silent.

1 Cor. 14:30

Since a revelation is that which is given by the Holy Spirit to believers, this verse clearly implies the sovereign superintendency of the Holy Spirit in this meeting. While one is speaking, the Holy Spirit may give a revelation to another. Furthermore:

Do not quench the spirit; Do not despise prophetic utterances. But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good.

1 Thess. 5:19-21

The context of verse 19 surely indicates that the interpretation of the verse applies, not to the individual life of a Christian, but to the meeting of the church. That was where prophetic utterances were being despised; that was where doctrine was to be carefully examined and that was where the Spirit was not to be quenched. He was to have freedom.

I remember hearing of a man who once shared a wonderful word of testimony at such a meeting as this, only to be reprimanded because he did it before the bread and cup had been taken! That is quenching the Spirit. It is denying Him His prerogatives as vicar of Christ. If the meeting is to be Spirit-led, then it is not to be bound by our rituals, traditions and preferences.

In the meeting of the church there was a liberty, a freedom. The Holy Spirit was leading. For us to establish a settled order of service, to set fixed limitations upon the length of the service or to restrict participation to the elders or to an approved man would be to quench the Spirit. To reject a particular type of Spirit-led ministry or participation is still another way a church may quench the Spirit. This is sinful rebellion against the vicar of Christ. It is an overt denial of His Headship.

While this verse has its direct application to the church, undoubtedly there is a word of instruction here for individuals as well. To refuse to participate in prayer or sharing or teaching when the Spirit of God is urging one to do so is just as surely to quench the Spirit. This is sinful. It is a denial of the Lordship of Christ in one's personal life. It deprives the body of Christ, the believer himself, and the glorified Lord of the certain blessing that invariably accompanies Spirit-led participation.

We all pay token allegiance to the doctrine of the Headship of Christ. But how shall we confess it? How is it to be practically demonstrated in the local church? By permitting His representative to preside at the church meeting!

This will be made manifest by another principle which is demonstrated in this passage.

V. IT IS A MEETING FOR THE SPIRIT-LED EXERCISE OF SPIRITUAL GIFTS.

This is what these verses are all about. Let me take you through the paragraph to demonstrate the point.

In verse 26 Paul gives us a general direction concerning the exercise of spiritual gifts in the meeting. He says,

When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification.

1 Cor. 14:26

The basic principle, then, is that gifts should be exercised for the edification of the body. All that is to be done is for the purpose of building up the saints in their faith and love. Only what is edifying is to be permitted in the meeting.

In verses 27-33 the apostle gives us specific directions concerning the exercise of these gifts. First, in verses 27-28 he speaks of THE GIFT OF TONGUES and establishes four rules for regulating the gift.

- a) Only two or at most three with this gift should speak during the service.
- b) They were to speak in succession – not together.
- c) Another should interpret for the one who spoke in a tongue. Only then is it edifying.
- d) If no one with the gift of interpretation was present, the one with the gift of tongues was to keep silent. It is obvious from this that the one with the gift of tongues did not speak with an irresistible impulse. If he chose to speak, he could.

Then in verses 29-33 Paul speaks of THE GIFT OF PROPHECY and gives three rules for controlling its use.

- a) The number of prophets to speak at a service was also limited to two or at the most three.
- b) The others, probably those with the gift of discerning of spirits (cf. 12:10) were to judge if this was indeed a revelation from God.
- c) If, when a prophet is speaking, something is revealed to another prophet sitting in the meeting, the first prophet is to be quiet and sit down permitting the second to speak. Obviously he was not under some irresistible force catapulting him forward. He had his spirit under control (v. 32), and thus could either speak or not speak.

Incidentally, we at Believers Chapel believe the Bible teaches that the "sign gifts" such as tongues, prophecy and healing were temporary and are not now in existence. However, the principles for the regulation of gifts are still valid.

Finally, in verses 34-36, he deals with THE ROLE OF WOMEN in the church meeting. Simply stated she is to be silent and is not to exercise her gift publicly.

- a) This is established in v. 34 by a clear statement of the apostle: "Let your women keep silent in the churches." To suggest as some do, that the verb "speak" here means "to chatter" is untenable. Although occasionally it did have this meaning in classical Greek, there is no support for this use in the New Testament. The verb is used eighteen times in this chapter alone (e.g. vs. 3, 19, 21, 29). The uniform use of the word is "to speak" and the context is in relation to the exercise of gifts. Paul is not speaking here, as others suggest, of disorders arising out of interruptions by women during the service. He is talking about the exercise of the gifts mentioned in the preceding verses. Ruth Schmidt says Paul is "very likely conditioned by the society around him and expresses only a personal wish here." This is a remarkable statement, in view of our text. Paul's reasons are much different, as the following verses demonstrate.

b) The silence of women in the Church meeting is enforced in verses 34-37 by three arguments. First, there is the custom of the churches. Leon Morris, Charles Hodge and others maintain that the last phrase of verse 33 actually ought to be the beginning phrase of verse 34. If so it would read: "As in all the churches of the saints, let the women keep silent..." The fact that in no Christian church was public speaking permitted by women was in itself a strong proof that it was contrary to the spirit of Christianity. Paul calls upon the Corinthians to conform to accepted Christian practice.

Second, there is the weight of apostolic authority. Paul says, "It is not permitted to them to speak." This was not merely a personal or prejudicial wish, but the commandment of God (v. 37).

Third, there is the Scripture of the Old Testament. The apostle writes, "as also saith the Law." Perhaps he is referring to Genesis 3:16 where Eve is told that her husband will rule over her. The whole law of the Old Testament made clear the subordinate rank of women.

c) The silence of women is extended in verse 35, to a specific case. If a woman has a question she is not to ask it in the church meeting but rather she is to ask her husband at home. There is great wisdom in such counsel. Such an act on the part of a wife is an acknowledgment of her husband's headship and will gently encourage him into that role. She also shows respect for her husband and eliminates possible conflicts between her husband and a preacher.

d) The silence of women is expanded in I Timothy 2:11-14.

Let a woman quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness.

v. 11

This is developed in two specific areas in the following verse.

But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet.

v. 12

In the church meeting she is not to teach, exercising her spiritual gift, nor is she to take any public leadership role exercising authority over men. These are the two ways in which a woman is to be submissive in the church.

Why? I recently read a liberal theologian who rejected Paul's teaching here on the grounds that he was an arrogant bachelor with a bias against women. This is completely unsound. The apostle's reasons are theological and historical. His first reason is that the man's priority in creation implies his priority in the chain of command in the church.

For it was Adam who was first created and then Eve.

v. 13

Paul also reasons that the woman's priority in the transgression lead to her subordinate role of ministry in the church.

And it was not Adam who was deceived, but the woman being quite deceived, fell into transgression.

v. 14

Thus the woman who usurped authority over her husband and took the leadership in Genesis 3 is forbidden to do so in the church.

Of course this negative command must be always counterbalanced by the many positive aspects of a woman's ministry. In her home she is to be a godly mother (I Tim. 2:15) and a gracious hostess (Heb. 13:2, I Peter 4:9, Rom. 12:13). Outside her home she is to be a teacher of younger women (Titus 2: 3-5) and also is able to labor side by side with the men, helping them (Phil. 4:2-3).

In summary, regarding the exercise of spiritual gifts, the general rule is edification; the accompanying rules are orderliness and silence of woman. Within these guidelines there is the freedom of the Holy Spirit to exercise gifts in this meeting.

Following the pattern of the New Testament church, in our Sunday evening meeting at Believers Chapel there is just such freedom. There is always opportunity for the discovery and continuing development of spiritual gifts. Just a few weeks ago, one of the highlights of our Sunday evening meeting was when a high school lad read the first three verses of Psalm 1 and shared with us some thoughts from the Psalm.

We must be very careful about our perspective. Sometimes we can become just a little resentful when we look at a young person speaking and think of him as practicing on us. Our attitude toward that situation should be like the track coach who is used to seeing men speed down the 100-yard track in nine seconds flat, and then sits in his own living room and watches his first son take his first two or three toddling steps. Which is more thrilling to him? It depends on his perspective. If he is looking as a track coach only, the living room scene is kid stuff. But if he is looking as a father and sees that young lad starting to grow and mature, taking his first couple of steps, he is the most elated man on the face of the earth! Sometimes I leave the Sunday evening service almost that elated. I see a man who has become a Christian and then he stands up and he gives out a hymn or he prays. It thrills my heart because here I see a man who is growing. He has taken his first public step and it is a sign of spiritual growth. Men talk to men about wanting to discover their spiritual gift, wondering how to discover it and how to develop it. My response is: in the meeting of the church. One major purpose of it is for the Spirit led exercise of spiritual gifts.

VI. IT WAS A MEETING WITH A THREE-FOLD PURPOSE.

This is obvious from the various ingredients that made up the meeting of the early church.

As we have noted previously, there was the Spirit-led EXERCISE OF SPIRITUAL GIFTS for the edification of the saints. This was the time and place for teaching, exhortation and praise.

When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification.

1 Cor. 14: 26

There was the celebration of the LORD'S SUPPER in commemoration of His death, and as a proclamation of this death to the world.

For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it, and said, "This is my body, which is for you: do this in remembrance of Me."

In the same way the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me."

For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.

1 Cor. 11:23-26

The meeting also included an OFFERING taken at the church meeting which was used to help the poor, the widows and the ministers of the Gospel.

Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I directed the churches of Galatia, so do you also. On the first day of every week let each one of you put aside and save, as he may prosper, that no collection be made when I come.

1 Cor. 16:1-2

To our surprise the church meeting was the time when PRAYERS were offered to God for the salvation of the unbelievers, for the government leaders and for the country.

First of all, then, I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, for kings and all who are in authority, in order that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity.

I Tim. 2:1-2

This injunction obviously was to be carried out at the church meeting - the weekly meeting of the believers. The phrase "in every place" (I Tim. 2:8) is characteristic of Pauline literature (I Cor. 1:2, II Cor. 2:14, I Thess. 1:8) and implies every place of public worship. A second evidence that this exhortation applies to the church meeting is seen in I Tim. 3:15, when Paul states his purpose for writing the letter. It was "so that you may know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God..." Thus at their meeting they prayed for Nero and his salvation!

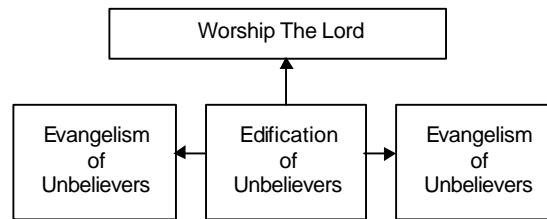
This meeting was also the occasion for MISSIONARY REPORTS and words of TESTIMONY, sharing what God was doing in them and through them.

And when they had arrived and gathered the church together, they began to report all things that God had done with them and how He had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.

Acts 14:27

All these elements made up the meeting of the early church. Since several ingredients were always present, there was no such thing as a worship service or a meeting devoted exclusively to the remembrance of the Lord in the New Testament.

What, then is the purpose of the meeting? There seems to be a three-fold purpose.



It certainly is a worship service, since through hymns, ministry, prayers, testimonies and the Lord's Supper, we worship the Lord. But it is more than that. The meeting is also for the edification of the church. Through teaching, exhortation and exercising of gifts the believers are built up. But again this is not all. It is also for the evangelism of the unsaved. Those present are evangelized by the proclamation of the gospel in the celebration of the Lord's Supper, and those absent, even governors and presidents are the object of intercessory prayer for their salvation.

So you see there is a three-fold purpose of the church meeting: worship of the Lord, edification of the saints, and evangelism. Do you see what we have done to this service in Christendom today? We have segmented it. On Sunday morning we worship; Sunday night we evangelize; and Wednesday night we pray. We have taken all the ingredients of the New Testament meeting and made an individual meeting for each element, whereas in the early church meeting they were all together in one glorious expression of worship, ministry and evangelism.

Recently friend asked me, "Why do you have that kind of service on Sunday evenings at the Chapel, anyway?" Simply stated, it is because the New Testament apostolic church met this way. They met weekly on the evening of the first day of the week without any professional ministry, without any settled format, exercising their gifts as led by the Holy Spirit and keeping in mind their three-fold purpose for meeting.

I seriously doubt that many would argue with this. I suspect that most Bible teachers and ministers would concur with what has been said to this point. Now for "the great divide."

IS IT NECESSARY?

Admittedly, this is the way the early church did it, but is it necessary for us to do that today? Consider these points.

The practices of the apostles were their precepts for the Christian church. To emphasize this, the apostle says,

If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord's commandments.

1 Cor. 14:37

These are not Paul's preferences; Paul is giving us commandments of the Lord.

Also, the original manner of meeting is the best way to demonstrate some of the basic principles of the church. What better way to give expression to the Headship of Christ (Col. 1:18, Eph. 1:22) than to meet with His representative on earth, the Holy Spirit, presiding? What better way to demonstrate the priesthood of all believers (I Peter 2:9) than to meet with no officialdom, with all on the same level, as priests to offer our sacrifices? What better way to implement the doctrine of spiritual gifts than to have a meeting where there is the freedom to discover and develop gifts?

A minister, just this week, was horrified at the prospects of such a meeting in his church. He said, "I would be afraid of what would be said." A friend once said to me; "But it is too different. I couldn't get used to that." Someone has objected: "The silences really get to me." A student who likes to watch the performance of old pros once described such a meeting as "Amateur Night" at the church. We will admit that there are problems, but before we jettison the New Testament church meeting, consider these further comments.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

The New Testament meeting is the type of service that allows for a great deal that is not edifying. There can be confusion, disorder and low quality teaching.

I know that this has been a problem to many people, but we need to remember that the problem undoubtedly existed in the New Testament times also. Women must have stood up; heretics certainly spoke out; and people without gifts surely took part. The very structure of the service allows for occurrences which are not edifying. Now what shall we do about it? Well, of course, we could establish a professional ministry that would guard against it. Only men who are qualified and approved by the elders and gifted men could take part. Strange that the apostles did not do that! They refused because the price would have been too great. They would have denied an expression of the Headship of Christ and an opportunity for expressing the body life of Christ and the priesthood of believers. Too much would have been sacrificed.

Thus we are not intending to change the Sunday evening service by structuring it or by bringing in gifted men and organizing them to minister to the service. I suspect that if we did that our crowds would double or triple and many people would be very happy. But, first of all, it would mean leaving the practice of the early church. Secondly, we would lose too much and contradict by our practice many principles which we hold very dear. The answer, of course, is that those of us who are spiritual, those of us who see that some unedifying things occur, ought to come prepared to participate so that what does occur in the service will be edifying. May I exhort you, may God stir your heart to contribute in the church meeting in such a way that it will always be a blessed time of edification of all who attend.

The second observation I want to make is that it is the type of service which may contain some very distressing periods of silence. I know that silence is a great irritation to some, but silences ought to be expected because of the nature of the service. If the Spirit of God is leading without any structure or format, we would expect silences. In fact, these silences can be times of great blessing. How can we transform that irritating silence into a blessing? First, we can use it as a time of meditation on a hymn or scripture or message just given. Thank God for silences when we can apply a truth or reflect upon its implications. Secondly, we can use it as a time of prayer. Worship, praise, petition, confession and dedication are often appropriate responses after a message or hymn. What a blessing to have a few moments to respond. Finally, we can use it as a time of exercise: "Lord is this the time you want me to speak or take part publicly?"

The problem with many of us is that we just do not like silences. When we sit down to study we turn on the radio. We are a generation that is frightened of, and made insecure by, silence. But, properly used, these times of silence can be times of great blessing in our spiritual lives.

However, silences are not necessary. Often they are a thermometer of the true spiritual temperature of our church, indicating a coldness of heart, a fear of men, a quenching of the Holy Spirit or an unprepared heart. When we get up and walk out we are inclined to point the finger at others and blame them for the poor meeting, when the fact is that the finger of God is actually being pointed at us. Our true spiritual temperature has just been taken!

One of the ways that we can eliminate such times of silence brings me to my third observation: participation in the meeting demands preparation of heart. That is what makes it so different from every other service. You could come to the Sunday morning service with no preparation of heart, but the effectiveness of the Sunday evening service, humanly speaking, depends upon your preparation. I generally spend many hours preparing for my Sunday morning message. If it is delivered in the energy of the Holy Spirit, then it is a blessing to God's people. But in the Sunday evening service, when we gather together for the meeting of the church, the effectiveness depends upon the preparation of every 'Priest' that attends. When Paul said, "When you come together you have a song, a doctrine....," he implied preparations. It is obvious they came to the meeting of the church to give, not to get. That is the great distinction. You come Sunday morning to get; you come to Sunday School to get; you come on Tuesday and Wednesday nights to get; but you come to the meeting of the church to give. If you can readjust the perspective in your life, it will revolutionize your whole point of view in relation to the meeting of the church. It is a meeting where we come to give. May God help us to be prepared as we come to this service.

But how? We will want to come in full fellowship with our Lord. That means with our sins confessed and cleansed (I John 1:9). We may come with a hymn on our mind for meditation or for giving out. We may have a particular portion of scripture on our heart to teach or to meditate upon. We may come with an experience that God has brought in our lives this past week and be ready to share it in the service. Can you imagine what would happen at the service if we all came ready to give? Just imagine the delight to the heart of man and every man from their heart giving something to God. That is what the meeting of the church should be. It comes only by preparation of the heart.

In the final phase of our preparation should be those five quite minutes just before the service begins. To say then: "I am available to You Lord, I have something to give to You and to Your people. Lead me to give it if it is Your will."

Finally, it requires the leading of the Holy Spirit. It is a Spirit-led, Spirit-controlled meeting. We are dependent upon Him to lead, and we can be sure He will not fail us. "But," you ask, "how can I know He is leading me?" Let me ask you: "How do you walk in the Spirit?" This is how the Christian is to live his life day by day. The person who does not know how to walk in the Spirit during the week will not know how to be led by the Spirit during the church meeting.

Some simple suggestions may help. First and foremost, come prepared. Then make yourself available to the Holy Spirit at the beginning of the meeting. A strong desire in your heart may indicate the Lord is leading you to take part. I have often prayed, "Lord, if this desire is from you, intensify it just now." The direction or mood of the meeting may confirm your desire to participate. Often I have come prepared with a verse or a hymn and found it fits perfectly with what someone else says before me. That is a great encouragement to take part.

A GREAT MISTAKE

Do not mistake the traditional church service held in churches across America with the New Testament church meeting. They are as different as day is from night. Let us maintain the New Testament church meeting, and contribute to make it the highlight of the Lord's day, the epitome of our worship, the finest in our teaching, and the center of our program.

Again I say I find it hard to imagine anything that could be more dynamic and exciting, more meaningful, relevant and edifying for me as a Christian, and more glorifying to the Lord than this kind of a church meeting.

But beware. A greater error than mistaking the traditional church service for the New Testament church meeting is the error of mistaking man's way of salvation for God's way.

Since the beginning of time, man has sought to improve by self-effort, self-mortification and self-imposed tortures. Martin Luther fasted, scourged himself and underwent great privation. He became emaciated in body and broken in health. Then the light broke upon his darkened soul, and he exclaimed "He that made the heavens must do this, or it will remain forever undone." God revealed to him the soul-liberating truth that "the just shall live by his faith" (Hab. 2:4) and be justified before God.

A humble Moravian workman asked John Wesley before his conversion the searching question, "Do you hope to be saved?" "Yes, I do," replied Wesley. "On what ground do you hope for salvation?" asked the Moravian. "Because of my endeavors to serve God," said Wesley. The Moravian made no reply. He only shook his head and walked silently away. Wesley, in speaking of the incident later said, "I thought him very uncharitable. saying in my heart, 'Would he rob me of my endeavors?'" Later, Wesley saw the light - that salvation is solely of grace, "not of works or righteousness which we have done," or can do. He saw what his brother Charles saw and expressed in these words:

*Could my tears forever flow,
Could my zeal no languor know,
These for sin could not atone;
Thou must save, and Thou alone;
In my hand no price I bring,
Simply to Thy cross I cling.*

To mistake man's way for God's way is the greatest error you shall ever make. Will you just now confess to God your sinful state? Thank Jesus Christ for dying for your sin. Receive Him as your personal Savior.

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast.

Eph. 2:8-9