

Inter-Assembly Fellowship: Enriching

Before we commence reflecting on this subject named above, a brief reminder of the autonomous nature of each local church, as outlined in scripture would be necessary.

- **Who has authority over local assemblies?**

- God (Matt. 18. 19; 1 Cor. 3.9, 16 – ‘*ye are God’s building*’),
- the Lord Jesus (Rev. 22. 16; Matt.18. 20 – ‘*I Jesus have sent mine angel to testify unto you these things in the churches;*’),
- the Holy Spirit (Rev. 3. 22 – ‘*He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches*’)
- the Apostles’ teaching (1Cor. 7. 17 – ‘*And so ordain I in all churches*’; 1 Cor. 11. 16; 14. 33-34; 16. 1; 2 Cor. 11. 28; Rev. 1. 4).

No one else! There is no scripture for a pope, archbishop, convenor, moderator or even chief elder. The assembly belongs to God.

- **Did the local assemblies as an aggregated whole ever make a joint decision?** No, there is no evidence to support this
- **Did a group of local churches ever organise themselves together and bind themselves by a collective authority?** No, there is no evidence to support this.
- **Did a group of elders or a group of evangelists from several assemblies ever get together to resolve the issue across a country or part of a country?** No, there is no evidence to support this.
- **Is there any other God-ordained organism in the scriptures for believers to gather together?** No, there is not. We have no scripture at all for any organisations to be supra to the local assembly e.g. a Christian mission. Para-church organisations are emerging all the time. We must remember, despite the worthiness of their work and aims (for which we give God thanks and never belittle), that we have no scriptural basis for their existence. Many of these organisations have emerged due to a failure by local assemblies to rise to their responsibilities.

If this is the case, what did inter-assembly fellowship look like in the early days of the church?

1. Personal Partnership – leading to a wider sense of Christian community

In the first century, as God’s people moved across the Roman empire, they brought greetings and information of assembly practice in each of their locations. A couple called Priscilla and Aquilla were in the assembly in Corinth (Acts 18.2); Ephesus (Acts 18.26) and Rome (Romans 16. 3) and in at least two of these locations the assembly met in their home. Personal friendships across assemblies would build up over time. Romans 16; Colossians 4, Philemon, 2 Timothy 4 list some of these friendships across assemblies that Paul, for example, had been in. Some of these friendships were very special. So some aspects of fellowship were global and real.

At other times the inter-assembly fellowship was more local, for example a part of Turkey there were seven assemblies:

Rev 1.12-13 ‘*And I turned to see the voice that spake with me. And being turned, I saw seven golden candlesticks; And in the midst of the seven candlesticks one like unto the Son of man, clothed with a garment down to the foot*’
Rev 1.20 ‘*...and the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are the seven churches.*’

The seven churches in Asia were standing on seven separate lampstands answerable directly to the Lord Jesus who walked in their midst, each getting a distinct letter to each assembly that met their individual needs. However, they also were able to read and receive each of the letters and learn from each other. They were geographically located near each other. There would have been movement of people through trade, employment and fellowship would have happened between each of the assemblies.

When Paul writes to the assembly in Colossae, he also encourages inter assembly fellowship in nearby assemblies up the river Lycus in Hierapolis and Laodicea, in prayer (Col.4. 12-13) in personal presence (v15) in preaching the truth of God’s Word (v16):

Col. 4.12-16 Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ, saluteth you, always labouring fervently for you in prayers, that ye may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God. For I bear him record, that he hath a great zeal for you, and them that are in Laodicea, and them in Hierapolis. Luke, the beloved physician, and Demas, greet you. Salute the brethren which are in Laodicea, and Nymphas, and the church which is in his house. And when this epistle is read among you, cause that it be read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and that ye likewise read the epistle from Laodicea.

Question:

Do we pray for and love the believers in other assemblies nearby or pray for and work in the area/country we have been called to serve in? Are we too parochial in our love and care? We know there is much we can have no fellowship with that calls itself 'Christian' but let us pray for and work with all companies of believers who are gathered to His Name alone, seeking to honour God and use the scriptures as their sole authority. Let us also give God thanks for anything done in His Name by any group of Christians even if we cannot fully go along with it (Phil. 1. 16-18). Do we support other believers who do not meet in our assembly or support other assembly meeting elsewhere, or even put off a meeting in one company to support something special in another? Do we have a sense of the call to the work of God in my area/country? Do we ever pray about this collectively? Am I aware of what is going on around me?

2. Practical Partnership - A wider sense of responsibility for visitors on their travels

Assemblies supported and looked after believers from other assemblies who travelled from a distance to come to their assembly (Romans 16. 1-2). When Paul and his friends were in Caesarea not only did the assembly show practical love and support in looking after them, they even walked with them all the way to Jerusalem and then one brother (who had been saved perhaps during the Lord's teaching) gave them lodging in Jerusalem. They looked after their immediate needs and their future needs.

Acts 21.15-17: 'And after those days we took up our carriages, and went up to Jerusalem. There went with us also certain of the disciples of Caesarea, and brought with them one Mnason of Cyprus, an old disciple, with whom we should lodge. And when we were come to Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly.'

The assembly in Caesarea saw itself as strategically placed, being a sea port. They might not be able to have Paul stay when he came from the assembly at Jerusalem, but they could help him onto a ship (Acts 9. 30). The assembly in Thessalonica took responsibility for taking Paul by ship to Athens: '*And they that conducted Paul brought him unto Athens: and receiving a commandment unto Silas and Timotheus for to come to him with all speed, they departed'* (Acts 17. 15). This would have resulted in a loss of wages for some people and an expensive and treacherous boat trip. These saints may have needed support by the assembly to do this. How good are we at spotting need?

Assemblies also encouraged younger men to support Paul in his travels, this all involved sacrifice by these assemblies and for the individuals concerned for the work of God more widely: Acts 20.4-5: '*And there accompanied him into Asia Sopater of Berea; and of the Thessalonians, Aristarchus and Secundus; and Gaius of Derbe, and Timotheus; and of Asia, Tychicus and Trophimus. These going before tarried for us at Troas.'*

They would not have expected Paul to pick up their expenses! At the same time those travelling would have been with Paul simply on faith not on a business contract.

Question

What do we do to help other believers as they pass through our assembly on their journeys and work for the Lord? Would we consider going to support or supporting another to help an evangelist or missionary couple with their work for a period of time? Do we support others who are expending themselves in the work of God?

3. Prayerful Partnership – a common burden about poverty and supporting financially those in need.

The assemblies in an area of north Greece, Macedonia, and the assembly in Corinth, Southern Greece, jointly prayed for the poor in Jerusalem and had a joint exercise about meeting this need. Perhaps they informed each other by letter about it – they certainly kept in touch with Paul by letter.

The Macedonian Assemblies jointly entrusted certain individuals to bear each individual assembly gift to the believers in Jerusalem (2Cor. 8. 1-2, 18, 23). There was no common "assembly fund" but there were common individuals that they had confidence in to bear the different assembly gifts to Jerusalem.

But thanks be to God, which put the same earnest care into the heart of Titus for you. For indeed he accepted the exhortation; but being more forward, of his own accord he went unto you. And we have sent with him the brother, whose praise is in the gospel throughout all the churches; And not that only, but who was also chosen of the churches to travel with us with this grace, which is administered by us to the glory of the same Lord, and declaration of your ready mind (2 Cor. 8. 15 -19)

The fact that there was more than one person ensured that the financial matters were taken very seriously, and they could report back to the assembly at the end of their journey.

Question

Do we have a common burden to pray with other assemblies and seek to help meet a need that comes to our attention at short notice? Are we prepared to travel to take our aid to other parts of the world?

4. Particular But Positive Partnership – the need for true love to be seen in receiving others to the assembly fully and yet caution about who is to be received.

The early assemblies received God's people from other assemblies to their fellowship. Visitors brought a letter of commendation from the assembly that was sending them (Rom. 16. 1; Acts 18. 27; Eph. 6. 21-22) or they accepted that no letter was required as he who was coming was very well known and respected amongst them (2 Cor. 3. 1-2) or else they accepted that they would not be initially received until they had proved they were true or someone who the assembly could have confidence in confirmed they were true (Acts 9. 26-29). Their confidence would be assured if there was evidence of personal faith in Christ (Acts 9. 27), obedience in the waters of baptism (Acts 9. 18) and willingness to be identified with the Name of Christ alone (Matt 18. 20) owning no other allegiance to any religious order (Acts 9. 20, 22, 27) and bowing to His authority. The need for these letters was because this was 'God's House' and, therefore, not a free for all or up to any congregation to decide their own entry protocol. They were warned that some false teachers who Paul calls '*wolves*' would try to join them and worm their way in by the back door seeking to destroy the flock (Acts 20. 29) and John also warned us to '*try the spirits*' (1 John 4.1) It should be pointed out that believers were received to the assembly with all its privileges and responsibilities. They were not received to the breaking of bread only (Acts 2.42-43). Indeed, reception was not a theory but deeply practical. In the case of Phoebe when she visited the assembly in Rome (Romans 16.1-2) they were to '*receive her as becomes saints and assist her in whatsoever business she hath need of you*'. The idea of receiving people and letting them go from us without any form of practical care and support is foreign to the notion of scriptural reception.

Other visitors were also welcome. They were encouraged to sit and observe the gatherings of the saints even if they could not be received to the full fellowship of the assembly (1 Cor. 14. 23-25) they could still realise that "*God was amongst them of a truth*". Both the "unsaved" and "unlearned" (saved but not in fellowship) were free to observe the gatherings and be amongst the people of God.

Question

How do visitors and strangers feel when they arrive at the assembly we are in fellowship in? Are they welcomed and looked after in every way? Can they come and go without anybody speaking to them or inviting them to their home? Are we also careful about who we receive into the full fellowship? What steps do we take to make sure we are open, warm and loving to all who arrive and yet faithful and true to God's Word?

5. Partnership Problems - Painful but vital issues that need to be resolved in inter-assembly partnership. What do we do when there is a dispute between assemblies?

If each assembly must be careful about who they receive or excommunicate from the assembly, then it is a recipe for a break down in inter-assembly relations if other assemblies run rough shod over their decisions. This is one of the reasons why each assembly would request a letter of commendation when receiving someone from another assembly that is not known. If they have been disciplined and excommunicated from one assembly, they cannot run off to another and be received on a whim. However, we must caveat this statement by saying, solemnly, that sometimes elders can get it wrong and each assembly will be answerable to the Lord for their own actions and decisions. However, if there is a disagreement between two companies, we have scriptural precedent for responsible brethren sitting down and prayerfully talking it through with a view to resolving the issue. The assemblies at Jerusalem and Antioch assemblies had a point of doctrine that had occasioned division between them due to false teaching in Antioch by members of the Jerusalem assembly that had arrived in Antioch. The assembly in Antioch sent a few of their brethren they had confidence in, down to the responsible brethren in the assembly in Jerusalem to resolve this matter. They discussed this matter earnestly, prayerfully and in love. The sole arbiter over the discussion was the Holy Scriptures (Acts 15. 15). The

outcome of the resolution is recorded for us in Acts 15. This had a wider implication for other assemblies as well, as the false teaching had also been taught in Cilicia and Syria (Acts 15. 1-2, 22, 23, 41; 16. 4). Therefore, a letter was sent to these assemblies explaining the true position by the assembly in Jerusalem. The matter was resolved between the assemblies affected in grace and love. What we have no scripture for is involving companies in a dispute that they have no part in.

Question

What do you think the character of the men needs to be to have this type of inter assembly discussion? Do we practice this?

6. Promoting Partnership – what matters do neighbouring assemblies jointly commend, celebrate, and promote?

We do have examples of neighbouring assemblies jointly supporting and commending something or someone in the work of God. The assemblies, for example, at Derbe, Lystra and Iconium jointly commended Timothy to the work of the Lord and jointly supported the gospel.

Acts 16. 1-3: *‘Then came he to Derbe and Lystra: and, behold, a certain disciple was there, named Timotheus, the son of a certain woman, which was a Jewess, and believed; but his father was a Greek: Which was well reported of by the brethren that were at Lystra and Iconium. Him would Paul have to go forth with him.’*

This, incidentally, must have meant that Timothy visited and worked with all these assemblies, otherwise they would not have known him or his abilities? It also means that the assemblies were not parochial and were able to extend their commendation and support beyond the boundary of their immediate neighbourhood with a common interest in the spread of the gospel. What none of the three assemblies did was to create a fourth tier of authority supra to them in the form of a bible college that would prepare their evangelists for their work. That was their job. Nor did they create a new tier of authority in a missionary organisation that would take responsibility for where they should be sent. That was the work of the Holy Spirit.

Question

What are the assemblies in our neighbourhood jointly supporting and commending?

7. Preaching Partnership - How did assemblies engage itinerant preachers that moved between assemblies?

As we have observed on previous nights the normal pattern of the assembly is as a body (1 Cor. 12), with all the functions and gifts necessary for the assembly to thrive. However, there did exist people that moved between assemblies and ministered amongst them. We have a number of scriptures to support the movements of Evangelists and Apostles amongst many assemblies. Apollos is an example of an exhorter/teacher who moved about the churches seeking to help the saints (Acts 18. 24, 27). What happened when one evangelist/teacher moved from one assembly to another? The first thing is that the principle of assembly reception never altered. Apollos still had to be received by the church at Corinth and was helped in this by the brethren in Ephesus writing asking them to receive them. With the exception of the apostles who had a unique role at the commencement of the church age to unfold the mind of God, no evangelist, teacher or exhorter had any authority over an assembly. They greatly helped them, however. Largely the apostles worked in areas where there was no assembly of believers, baptising new converts and teaching the first principles of gathering and leaving behind an assembly of believers gathered out to the name of the Lord Jesus alone. They tended to stay in an area for some time - weeks (Thessalonica; 3 weeks Acts 17. 2), months (Greece; 3 months Acts 20.3) and years (Ephesus; 3 years Acts 20.31) before moving to their next area of service. The movements of the Lord servants were not controlled by any central authority. It was the Spirit of God who controlled their movements (Acts 16. 6-7). There was no organisation beyond the assembly, who had commended the worker (Acts 13.1-2), intruding between the worker and his commendation, with powers of authorisation or refusal. Nor was there any interference between an old established assembly on a newly formed assembly, apart from the missionary-evangelist called and used by God to see souls saved in that area and saints built up. These servants moved entirely in faith to meet their daily needs and were looked after by God’s people (1Cor. 9). There was no contract of engagement between the servant and the receiving church. The language of business was conspicuously absent but servants and supporting assemblies looked to the Lord to bless their ministry amongst God’s people.

Question

What is our burden for the spread of the gospel more widely? Do we pray that God would raise up others to take the gospel to the people in faith? How are we supporting this work?

