

Assembly Fellowship- Engagement?

1. **Who sets the rules of engagement in the assembly?**
2. **What are the rules of engagement in the assembly?**
3. **What is the spirit of engagement in the assembly?**
4. **What are the signs of engagement in the assembly?**
5. **What is the extent of engagement – see next week, dv**

1. Who sets the rules? Who is in charge? Jesus Christ is Lord.

In every business employment law has to be adhered to or there are consequences. In every denomination, church law is both written down and formally and informally adhered to. When it comes to the Bible, Who sets the rules in the local Church (assembly)? Who is in charge?

We have already shown that the local assemblies in the New Testament had no headquarters, no central administration, no overarching hierarchy overseeing church order. Each assembly was answerable to the Lord Jesus Christ directly (Matthew 18. 20). The churches in Asia, for example, are depicted as golden lampstands all on their own base answering directly to the Son of Man who walked amongst them (Rev. Ch. 2-3) Since this was the case, how was order maintained in the churches? All organisations spend a lot of time implementing sets of rules and laws for maintaining order and for establishing procedures when order breaks down. What did the local churches do?

The Lordship of Christ was preeminent and universally acknowledged. The outcome of this is reverence and worship

Absolute obedience to The Lord Jesus was demanded:

1 Cor.1. 2: 'Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours;'

1 Cor 10. 21-22: 'Ye cannot drink the cup of the Lord, and the cup of devils: ye cannot be partakers of the Lord's table, and of the table of devils. Do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? are we stronger than he?';

1 Tim.1:1 Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the commandment of God our Saviour, and Lord Jesus Christ, which is our hope;

1 Tim, 6:3 If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness; See also Mt.18:18-20).

The assembly was the place of the presence of the Lord– the only place where believers could fulfil their divine function as a priest in the priesthood (1Pet 2.5, 9: *'To whom coming, as unto a living stone, disallowed indeed of men, but chosen of God, and precious, Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ.'*), enjoy the immediate presence of Christ (Matt. 18. 20) and worship God collectively (Heb. 13.14-15: *Let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach. For here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come. By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name.*) Has this been forgotten that this is the chief purpose of God's House?

The assembly is His House (1 Cor. 3. 9: *'you are God's building'*). It is His temple (1 Cor. 3. 17: *'If anyone defiles the temple of God ...'*). *Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear* (Heb. 12. 28).

How afraid we should be of introducing anything that is not in keeping with His character.

The early church worshipped and prayed together

The assembly was the **place of collective prayer** where believers could unburden themselves in the presence of God and collectively pray for each other and the wider needs of their community and country and know the strengthening effect of praying together and for one another (Acts 4.22-24, 31). In one of their prayer meetings the very building they were in shook (Acts 4:31). Their praying was earnest and real. Prayer meetings in the early church did not take second place to the gathering to hear the word preached. In fact, prayer preceded the word preached (Acts 6:4). In some cases special prayer meetings commenced due to the matters that were burdening the saints, with sometimes spectacular results (Acts 12. 5). The prayer meeting was the power house. Angels attended their prayer meeting (1 Cor 11.10).

The fear of the Lord marked the place, not human rules, reasoning or ritual. Is this the reason for such departure today?

2. What are the rules of engagement? The Bible is central.

The Word of the Lord (the Scriptures) is the ultimate authority.

All practices in the local assembly required scriptural authority:

Acts 15. 14-15: *Simeon hath declared how God at the first did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name. And to this agree the words of the prophets; as it is written;*

1Cor. 14. 37: *If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord; Rom. 4. 3; 10. 11; 11. 2; Gal. 3. 22; 4. 30; 1 Tim. 5. 18; 2 Tim. 3.16:*

All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness; 1. 13, 14; Jas. 4. 5; 2 Peter 1. 20; 1Cor. 14. 36).

The Early Church continued in the apostles teaching

The assembly was the place where the Bible was central, where Spirit-filled teaching where believers could experience feeding, learning and spiritual growth. On one occasion the teaching of the scriptures went on till midnight:

Acts 20. 7: *And upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them, ready to depart on the morrow; and continued his speech until midnight.* Paul instructed Timothy to, ‘give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine’ at Ephesus (1Tim. 4. 13). Later he instructed him to ‘preach the word’ (2Tim. 4. 2). Paul taught that each assembly had those with the gift of teaching (1Cor. 12. 29); in Antioch’s case there was at least five with this gift (Acts 13. 1-2) and clear instructions were given on how this teaching should be executed (Rom. 12. 7; 1Cor.14). It was when writing to Corinth he spoke of things which should be taught in every church (e.g. 1Cor. 4. 17). The importance of teaching the scriptures was exemplified in the life of the Apostle Paul (Acts 20. 25; 28. 31). He said to the Thessalonians: 1Thess. 1. 5-6: *For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance; as ye know what manner of men we were among you for your sake.* They also discussed the scriptures. There was ample opportunity for saints to publicly discuss the scriptures. The word for “preached” in Acts 20. 7 is “discoursed” and is a clear indication that discussion, question and answers on the scriptures were taking place in the upper room. All believers were expected to “continue steadfastly in the apostle’s doctrine” (Acts 2. 42). The spirit of the Berean’s “searching the scriptures daily” (Acts 17. 11) would result in in-depth conversation at the individual and collective level. The fact that the women were encouraged to ask their husbands at home questions on scripture presupposes that it was happening at home and that the men had that opportunity to ask questions at the gatherings in the assembly (1Cor.14. 35). The scriptures were the language of their life. The upper room is a good example of discursive teaching – seven questions were asked and then answered by the Lord.

Is the relegation of the preaching of scripture and the removal of the sole authority of the Word of God the reason for such departure today?

3. What is the ‘spirit’ of engagement? The Fellowship of Christ is everything

We all know that there is the letter of the law and then there is the spirit of the law. What is written down does not reflect the attitude or harmony experienced. Some organisations you just walk through the door and you know that you are not welcome irrespective of how good their policy on HR is, it is true of many churches too. What was the spirit of engagement in the local church? The early church ‘fellowshipped’ (Acts 2. 42). Our fellowship is first of all vertical: ‘*Truly our fellowship is with the father and with His Son Jesus Christ*’ (1 John 1. 3) and then as we enjoy that truth it can be appreciated horizontally - ‘*But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another*’ (1 John 1. 7)

Spirit of Care and Love

The early church fellowshipped. The assembly was the place of Christian love, friendship and practical care where believers could experience Christian love and fellowship and shepherding. The assembly is likened to a body where there is the same mutual care for each member (1Cor. 12. 27). Just as the whole body suffers when one little member of the body is hurt, e.g. stubbing our big toe, so the whole body of the assembly suffers when one member is hurt (1 Cor. 12. 26).

Acts 2.44-46: ‘*And all that believed were together, and had all things common; And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart.*’

In the early days of the Church this practical work a huge part of the work. People were thrown out of their houses for turning to Christ and the assembly looked after them. Reads Acts 6 where many older people would have been abandoned by families and the assembly fed them and looked after them. Acts 6.1 *And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration.*

Looking after the vulnerable is of no less importance at the end of the apostle’s life where a whole chapter of his first letter to Timothy is devoted to how the assembly should look after widows (1Tim. 5). James is also clear that this practical care stretches to orphans as well (Jas.1:27) where the poor could be looked after and supported.

Jas 1.27: *Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.*; This support of the poor was not just limited to their area.... Rom.15:26: *For it hath pleased them of Macedonia and Achaia to make a certain contribution for the poor saints which are at Jerusalem.*

They did this kind of work 'naturally'. In the same way as a family works – it did not depend on a huge committee infrastructure or big appeals for finance. Sadly, some tried to formalise things and turn certain gatherings into social occasions called 'love feasts' and were condemned by the apostle for doing this (1Cor.11:17-22; Jude 12). This was not the focus of their gatherings as the assembly was about Christ, not so much a social network. However, the early Christians still did plenty social work, they just called it Christian love.

Spirit of Variety within Unity

As stated before, the assembly is likened to a body where there is the same mutual care for each member (1Cor. 12. 27) and each member is needed. This is why the first assemblies did not have a pre-arranged group of preachers from another church to preach at all their gatherings. No, there is no scripture to support this practice. The reverse is taught. The assembly is likened to a body where all the gifts given to the assembly are crucial to the wellbeing of the body (1Cor.12. 27). They normally used their own gift but obviously when visiting speakers came to give them some help they were delighted. They also did not have a salaried minister or pay one person to do most of the work. No, there appears to be no scripture to support this. In fact, Paul warns against the assembly doing this. He uses ironic language asking them to imagine a body being like one member – e.g. A big nose or one eye! *If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling?* (1 Cor.12.17). No, each one in the assembly was needed in this work. One of the most important gifts in the assembly is the gift of helps (1Cor. 12.28).

The early church believed in the Sovereignty of the Holy Spirit in the distribution of various gifts to the company for the benefit, up-building and maintenance of the assembly (1 Cor.12: 1-27). All had different gifts and different ministries which prevented rivalry and ensured order. There was always a plurality of gift ensuring no one person dominated (Acts 13. 1-2). Most members in the body are unseen and yet they are the most vital e.g heart, lungs as opposed to hands and feet (1Cor 12. 22-25). So in the assembly the unseen, silent work is the most important.

The sisters did not take part audibly (1Tim. 2. 11-12; I Cor.14. 34-35) but they did take part privately (1Cor. 11. 4-6) in all of the gatherings and they had vital roles in the assembly "fellowship" e.g. Acts 6.1; Titus 2.3-5 (older woman their support of the younger, families; Acts 9.36 (Dorcas – her almsdeeds, tailoress, good works); 18.26 (Prisca – her knowledge of scripture also 21.9); 16.14-15 (Lydia – her home for God's servants); 2. 46; 12. 12-13 (Mary); Rom. 16:1 (Phebe – servant of the assembly, comfort); Acts 2 (practical support – food and drink).

Spirit of Order and growth

The local assembly was the **place of spiritual opportunity** and the manifestation of God's power as they developed their unique gift for the benefit of others (Acts 6. 2-4; I Cor. 12.14-31)

The early church also believed in the Sovereignty of the Holy Spirit to order the affairs of every gathering and encourage effective use of gift on each occasion (1Cor. 14. 29-40; Acts 1. 8; 1 Thess. 1. 5).

Self-Control was also expected to be manifest by all (1Cor. 14:28, 30) to ensure order.

Elders and teachers were exhorted to **Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind** (1 Peter 5.3) and to assess the suitability of the teaching that the saints were being given (1Cor 14.29. 32).

The Holy Spirit presiding in the gatherings meant that their meetings were not a free for all (1 Cor 14.26-29) – but marked by order (1Cor 14.40).

The assembly as the place of education in Scripture. This was not delegated to an external organisation.

Elders were appointed by the Holy Spirit to ensure there was order.

Acts 20:28: Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.;

Heb.13:17: Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you.;

1Pet.5:3: Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock.). The character of such elders had to pass the test set out in 1 Tim.3:2-7.

How was gift exercised?

- I. **Divinely** – only those with a gift from Heaven (1 Cor.12:4-6: Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which worketh all in all.) and with a deep exercise of heart (2 Tim.1.6: stir up the gift of God, which is in thee; 1Cor.14:8, 25) who were willing to bring glory to God.
- II. **Orderly** – Not all at once, (1Cor.14:26, 31: For ye may all prophesy one by one, that all may learn, and all may be comforted, and 40: Let all things be done decently and in order.).
- III. **Intelligibly** – all must understand it (1Cor.14:9-15: So likewise ye, except ye utter by the tongue words easy to be understood, how shall it be known what is spoken? for ye shall speak into the air., 28).
- IV. **Profitably** – for edification, comfort, exhortation (1Cor.14:3). All must learn and all must be comforted (1Cor.14:31)
- V. **Affectionately** - In love; without this it is a waste of time (1Cor.13:3, 13, 14:1)
- VI. **Liberty** – No constraint on those who should speak, for how long they would speak or what they should take up (14:26, 30, 32). There was even recognition that others might speak who had not initially been expected to speak and other silent who might initially have expected to speak. Wisdom was required not to exhaust the saints with prescribing a limit of 3 speakers in any session of teaching.
- VII. **Scripturally** – It had to be bible-based teaching (1Cor.14:26) and a bible approved approach e.g. men not woman preaching (1 Cor.14:34), in a bible sanctioned context e.g. with all the church together (1 Cor.14:26, 23; 11:17-18; 12:25) not separated into different age groups or gender.

Is the lack of love and care, the restrictions of human machinery, the reason for the departure today?

4. What are the signs of engagement?

Religion has its rituals and its symbols almost all of them devised by humans. What symbols did the early church have. Not many. But the few they did have were significant. The simplicity of God's assembly is so important to preserve.

Water, Bible

As already discussed, The Lordship of Christ was recognised in immersion in water in baptism – symbol of the death, burial and resurrection of Christ (Romans 6. 3-6; Acts 8. 28-39; Acts 2. 41) and in an open and complete Bible as the sole authority governing all affairs.

Veils/unveiled

The Headship of Christ was recognised (1 Cor.11:1-17; Col.2: 19). Christ is the Head of each assembly. Honouring His Headship was symbolically displayed in the assembly by the uncovered heads of the males (taking of the Jewish Talith) and the covered heads of the sisters and the silence of the sisters (1Cor. 14.34-35) knowing that angels were looking on (1Cor 11.10). Paul explicitly teaches that just as there is no inferiority within the God-head but complete equality (1 Cor 11.1-2) so there is no inferiority between the gender of male and female but complete equality. Just as the Lord Jesus accepted the authority of God the Father so should the sister the authority of the brother.

One loaf,

The Unity of the body of Christ was practised and the complimentary roles of male and female, young and old etc. The early assemblies never ever divided the fellowship and had sectional meetings e.g. all the young people or all the men together or all the woman together? No, instead there is an emphasis of all the church being together at all the gatherings (Acts 2. 1, 42; Heb. 10. 25; I Cor. 11. 17-22). In fact, they are warned that they cannot break up the body (1 Cor. 12) or fully display headship unless female and male are together I Cor. 11. 7-11. This was expressed in symbol form in one loaf (1 Cor 10. 17) at the Breaking of Bread gathering. We have no examples of scripture that disciples' had sectional meetings or ever broke bread together on their travels, even when there were many of them. Even in Acts 27, Paul, Luke, Aristarchus and others who were with him never broke bread during the long voyage together. In fact, Paul said he had not eaten bread for 14 days (Acts 27.33). However, they did find an assembly at Puteoli where they abode seven days in order to break bread on the Sunday. Similarly, in Acts 20 several disciples were sailing together for 5 days, but they waited till they got to Troas assembly before breaking bread (Acts 20. 1-7).

Wine

The death and resurrection of Christ were universally acknowledged. The blood of Christ had washed their sins away (1 John 1.7) and wine was taken weekly at the Breaking of Bread to 'proclaim' His death until He comes again (1 Cor 11. 26).

