

# Why We Meet as We Do

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*May 4, 1997*

The scriptural exhortation for Christians to assemble themselves together is said to be all the more urgent as we see the day approaching (Hebrews 11:25). It is our heartfelt desire to meet together with other members of the body of Christ for the mutual encouragement of each other as the Lord instructs.

The fourteenth chapter of I Corinthians spells out the Lord's instructions to the early church for the coming together of the church. These directives provided for the orderly exercise of the spiritual gifts of all the brothers present, as the Holy Spirit led.

*What is (it) then, brethren? 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.*

*I Corinthians 14:26*

Although the Lord has never rescinded these directions, the obvious absence of the gift of tongues and the nebulous nature of "Revelations" today causes many to doubt that they still apply, especially since the Word of God has now been completed. But despite any ambiguity on the meaning of "Prophecy," prayer, hymns, and teaching certainly persist. We believe that it is still possible to follow the commandments (verse 37) of the Lord for the church.

The use of Spirit enabled "Tongues" to address the church in otherwise unknown foreign languages was discouraged as rather pointless, and literally forbidden unless someone who understood that language was there to interpret what was said. "Tongues" were actual foreign languages that native speakers of that language could understand. They are scarcely applicable at all in our situation, since we are unaware of anyone who possesses the legitimate gift of "Tongues" today.

Whereas the gift of tongues was given primarily for evangelism of unbelievers outside the church, prophecy was said to be more appropriate for ministry to believers within the church (Verses 22 & 4). "Prophecies" probably included the "Revelations" of verse 26. Such revelations may have been a special necessity for conveying the Lord's mind to the church before the New Testament was completed. But "Prophecy" is also described as speaking to men for edification, exhortation, and consolation in verse 3. This might also include the "Teachings" of verse 26. As the Old Testament prophets conveyed direct revelations from God to the people, so prophecy implies expressing the ministry that the Holy Spirit leads a participant from the congregation to present to the church. I Peter 4:11a seems to apply especially well to "Prophecy" in this sense:

*Whoever speaks, let him speak, as it were, the oracles of God.*

Whether or not any ministry should be called "Prophecy" today, Spirit led exhortation, encouragement, and teaching from the Word of God are certainly as appropriate forms of ministry for the church today as they ever were.

“Psalms” or hymns, presumably for congregational singing (Mark 14:26), and various prayers (Verses 14-17) are also still appropriate in the meetings of the church. Each participant had “A psalm, a teaching, a revelation” (verse 26). The Holy Spirit laid a hymn, a prayer, or a prophecy or teaching on the heart of whoever He chose to present it. The rest of the congregation were to judge its validity, rather than simply accepting everything presented as always coming from the Lord. Although all may speak at such meetings, prophetic ministry is to be limited to two or three speakers, and the floor is to be yielded as the Holy Spirit moves another speaker to respond. While an ensuing discussion is not forbidden, these instructions for the church do not seem to be a call for group discussions of the Scriptures, but for the presentation of ministry by individuals. There are no Scriptures anywhere that suggest that any individual was to preside at these “Open Ministry” meetings, although the elders present might have to refute anything grossly contrary to the Word of God (Titus 1:9).

The proximity of the instructions for the church’s coming together for the Lord’s Supper to the instructions for the “Open Ministry” meeting suggests to many that the “Open Ministry” meeting should be an integral part of the Breaking of Bread. The reference to “Coming together,” used for the Breaking of Bread (I Corinthians 11:20), and the “Open Ministry meeting” (I Corinthians 14:26) may support this view, but is not inconsistent with the view that they are separate functions of the church. When the Apostle gave instructions to abolish the Agape feast in favor of coming together simply to remember the Lord, he specifically said that he would arrange the remaining details when he came (I Corinthians 11:34). This raises a substantial doubt that the Breaking of Bread is to be considered part and parcel of the meeting described in I Corinthians 14. Would the Apostle state his intention of addressing the remaining details for the Breaking of Bread when he came, and then proceed to address them in the following chapters before he came?

We feel that whether the Breaking of Bread was a separate meeting convened specifically to remember the Lord or was part and parcel of the “Open Ministry” meeting is not definitively established in the Scriptures. And since the Word of God does not reveal what the “Rest” that the Apostle would set in order when he came consisted of, we feel that God did not choose to render specific instructions on how to conduct the Breaking of Bread. We have essentially combined these two functions of the church, more or less stressing ministry appropriate to the remembrance of Lord until it culminates in the actual partaking of the emblems. We believe that the Holy Spirit is able take more or less of the time for the remembrance and leave more or less of it for other ministry by His guidance throughout the meeting. Whether separate or combined, we consider that the rules for church conduct apply to both functions as prescribed meetings of the church.

We have kept this prescribed meeting of the church short enough that our children can sit through it with us without undue frustration. But because I Corinthians 11:27 solemnly warns that “*Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord,*” we do not believe that children who are too young to pay attention or understand what they are doing should partake of the emblems of the Lords Supper. And since our sharing of the cup, and especially the bread, of the Lord’s Supper together is an expression of unity as fellow members of the body of Christ (I Corinthians 10:16-17), we do not believe that unbelievers or those whose status is questionable should be offered the emblems of the Lord’s Supper. We are not in fellowship with their rejection of Christ. Those who bring such people to the meeting for any reason should tactfully advise them of this policy beforehand. And, of course, professing Christians whose behavior or doctrine is grossly inconsistent with godliness and basic Christianity are not even to be received into the assembly of Christians (I Corinthians 5 and II John 9-11).

Women are to remain silent in the meetings of the church.

*Let the women keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but let them subject themselves, just as the law also says. And if they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in church.*

*I Corinthians 14:34,35*

This injunction is specifically against women **speaking** in the church. We do not believe that there is anything here or elsewhere in the Scriptures to suggest that they are not to join in the congregational singing. They are not only to refrain from ministering or leading the church in its worship or prayer, but they are not so much as to ask questions for their own learning. Any questions that arise in their minds are to be addressed outside the meetings of the church.

The stated reason for the women's silence in the church is that they are to subject themselves, "Just as the Law says." Although the written Mosaic Law did not specifically prohibit women from speaking in the assemblies of the Lord's people, they are never seen speaking in them anywhere in the Old Testament. The "Law" probably refers to the Pentateuch, where God subjugated the woman to her husband because of her role in the fall.

*Your desire shall be (to) your husband, and he shall rule over you.*

*Genesis 3:16*

This place of subjection related to the her role in the fall is reiterated in the New Testament.

*Let a woman quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness. But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet. For it was Adam who was first created, and then Eve. And it was not Adam who was deceived, but the woman being quite deceived, fell into transgression.*

*I Timothy 2:11-14*

This teaching of the "Law" on the silence of women in the assembling of the Lord's people might also be derived from the fact that the priests were all to be men, etc.

But women are not enjoined to silence outside the meetings of the church. Women were sent personally by the Lord to tell the disciples that He was risen, and that they should go to Galilee to meet Him (Matthew 28:1-10). Priscilla and Aquila took Apollos and explained the way of God more accurately to him (Acts 18:26). Philip had four daughters who prophesied (Acts 21:9). And the older women were to teach the younger women (Titus 2:3-5).

In our desire to meet in accordance with the Scriptures, we struggle to discern what "In church" means. It is obviously not all the time the church is together. Hopefully, no one would insist that women remain silent during a fellowship dinner together, or during breaks between meetings. What about a Sunday school, when time is devoted to the encouragement of children? Is it all right to have women Sunday school teachers? Can little girls ask for their favorite songs in Sunday school? Should little girls be free to do so, but not grown women? Do the commands of the Lord for church meetings apply to Sunday school, or to the adult class but not the children's class? Or is Sunday school simply not a meeting of the church? And if it is not a meeting of the church, do we have any right to have a Sunday school? And what about a Bible study, not to be confused with the "Open Ministry" meeting of the church?

When the disciples came together to Break Bread in Acts 20:7, the Apostle Paul addressed the congregation before they broke the bread. We question that this lengthy sermon by a single speaker was part of an open format ministry meeting. Although it has little to do with the format of the Breaking of Bread, we consider this passage license enough for meetings of other formats than the Open Ministry meeting to be held while the church is gathered together primarily for Breaking of Bread

and/or open ministry. We see no reason why outreach meetings, addresses to Christians, or things like children's meetings cannot be conveniently held when the church has come together for the Breaking of Bread.

We have elected to follow the prescribed meeting(s) of the church with a children's meeting, where they can request their favorite songs and be encouraged in the gospel and in godliness. After singing with the adults' help, they are dismissed to their mentor(s) with prayer. The adults normally proceed with an open discussion Bible study while the children are busy with their supervised activities. When appropriate, the adult time can be used for addresses or other ministry as well. We have seen the evidence that this option has been a blessing to our children over the years.

We have not insisted on women's silence in such ancillary meetings because they are not specifically prescribed as meetings of the church. It seems a mite inconsistent to insist that the women follow the rules of I Corinthians 14 in a meeting where when the men are not following them to the letter. We admit that such meetings may still may qualify as "In Church," and are not certain what the Lord's will on the issue might be. We have more or less left it up to the individual's conscience, as we have done with the interpretation of whether the head coverings of I Corinthians 11:3-15 refer to long hair or supplemental veils that can be put on and taken off at will. We would, however, be reticent for a woman to take a leadership role in any of our meetings, as the Scriptures relate her attitude of subjection to her place in the fall rather than her place in the church.

Our little group also meets together--primarily for Christian fellowship--on Sunday evenings. We enjoy singing our favorite hymns together, and usually share a little of the Word of God together at that time. We do not consider that we are meeting on "Church" grounds and make no pretense of following church order at this time. We have no set format or rules for this time of fellowship and relaxation together, and may take advantage of the ministry of visitors or anyone else with something on their heart.

We take the liberty to gather on Tuesday evenings for prayer, and a more systematic study of the Word of God together. Although we do not find any such meeting described in the Scriptures, the exhortation and teaching associated with Paul's urging to Timothy to give attention to the reading of the Word (I Timothy 4:13) may imply some kind of public forum for Bible study. We certainly do not find such meetings prohibited by the Scriptures. We generally prefer an open group discussion format for this meeting, however we feel free to alter that format for any special opportunities or circumstances that might arise. We would not be opposed to appropriate isolated or serial addresses at this time. Again, since we do not find this meeting described as "In church," we have not insisted on the Scriptural format for church meetings at this time.

We have chosen an open format for most of our meetings because we have not found the appointment of any individual to preside over any local assembly of Christians in the Scriptures. Rather, it seems that the New Testament churches were led by the older brothers who had demonstrated a reasonable degree of faithfulness and Christian maturity. The general qualifications of these "Elders" of the church are noted in I Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-1. A genuine consideration of these stringent requirements encourages reticence to insist on that title. Nevertheless we believe that the assembly should be led to function according to the Word of God by the more spiritually mature brothers in it.

Finally, we meet the way we do because we believe that it is consistent with the Word of God. We admit to our own weakness and failure in these very things. We are well aware that many earnest

Christians do not interpret the Scriptures on these issues exactly as we do. We are encouraged by godliness wherever we see it, and certainly have no contention with those who meet in other ways. We accept the Lord's declaration that "He that is not against us is for us" (Mark 9:40), and welcome the fellowship of all believers walking in reasonable doctrinal and moral purity who come in the spirit of Christian unity. May the Lord bless all of His people who attempt to walk uprightly!

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