

Growth and the Assembly

M. W. Bassford

4-26-09

Introduction.

- A. A couple of years ago, Lauren and I happened to be visiting her Uncle Chuck and Aunt Betty in Tennessee, and, it being a Wednesday night, we naturally went with them to Bible study. I don't remember the topic of the study that evening, but I do recall one thing about our visit there. Just like we do, they had one of those boards up at the front that recorded the recent attendance. According to that board, their attendance last Sunday morning had been 60, not bad for a country church. Their attendance that Sunday night? 59.
- B. To be honest, brethren, I've never seen that anywhere else, in any of the congregations I've been associated with. There is always a big drop in attendance from Sunday morning to Sunday night and Wednesday night, and there is certainly such a drop here. There are literally dozens of Christians here who show up Sunday mornings, but rarely, if ever, put in an appearance otherwise. Now, sometimes that's understandable. There are Christians whose health or whose work schedule prevents them from assembling more than once a week. What I don't understand, though, are the brethren who could be here, but choose not to be.
- C. In saying this, I don't mean to turn the assembly into a sacred cow. I'm not saying that we should come together just because. Instead, there are a number of important spiritual goals before us that are nearly impossible for us to accomplish unless we make a commitment to being here every time the doors are opened. These times we come together are the most spiritually powerful times of our lives. We need to take advantage of them. Let's learn why as we look at growth and the assembly.

I. Assembly in the First Century.

- A. To many Christians today, the assembly has become a requirement. They don't particularly get anything out of assembling when they come, so their primary concern is with showing up the minimum number of times that they imagine will keep God and the elders off their backs. Other Christians don't assemble whenever the doors are open because they think of the assembly as a nice little extra, something that they will fit into their lives if they can, but if they can't, oh well. It's an important first step, then, for us to consider these attitudes in light of the way Christians assembled in the first century. A telling passage in this regard is Acts 2:46. According to this passage, it was the practice of the Jerusalem church to come together every day.
- B. This tells us something profound about the importance of the assembly to those brethren. They didn't ask how infrequently they could come together. They didn't think of the assembly as a lower priority than the rest of their lives. Instead, the assembly was the center of their lives, and they fit everything else around it.
- C. Just imagine, friends, the zeal and the commitment that it took to do that. Just a couple of weeks ago, during our gospel meeting, we went through almost a full week where we assembled every day. For all of us, that was a lot of work. It takes a huge expenditure of energy to take care of everything else in our lives in two fewer hours a day, to clear that space for a week for the assembly. We're worn out by the end of meeting week. And yet, that daily commitment to meeting is something the early Christians did week in, week out.
- D. We see what drove those early Christians in Acts 13:44. They came because they wanted to hear the word of God, and this is a motivation we should share today. We don't partake of the Lord's Supper every time we come together. We don't give of our means every time. But every time, we do study God's word, and we spend more time studying than doing anything else. Learning is the heart of the assembly.
- E. In fact, our opportunities to discover God's will for us are greater here than anywhere else. We can study the Bible on our own, but in our Bible classes, we have the opportunity to share our ideas with one another and learn as a group about God's will. Even when I write the material, even when I teach the class, I always come away from every class session here with new insight just because of the comments that others make.
- F. Likewise, we're blessed with the opportunity to hear sermons from God's word. Sometimes, I think it takes a preacher to properly appreciate sermons. Back before I started preaching, I admit, I took sermons for granted too. Now, though, I really miss the chance to listen to them regularly. A good sermon is a marvelous opportunity to learn about a topic because all of the thinking about which passages to use and how to fit them together has already been done. It's like the difference between making lasagna from raw ingredients and going down to Olive Garden and ordering lasagna. Both get you to the same place, but one is a lot easier.

II. The Importance of the Word.

- A. Because the assembly is the best place to hear the word, that makes the assembly important because the word is important. Peter points out one of its main uses to Christians in 1 Peter 2:2. Just as milk is to a baby, so the word of God is to us: it's impossible for us to grow without it. Nor is that all. A baby who is deprived of milk won't just stop growing. In a very short time, once it depletes the body fat it's already built up, it's going to start dying. Likewise for Christians. There's not a single one of us here who's maintaining the same

level of spirituality. Either we are growing in Christ, or we are spiritually dying. Perhaps the single most important factor in determining which we are is how often we are coming together.

- B. Growth, though, isn't important simply because it prevents dying. Instead, it also promotes a number of important spiritual goals. The first of these is stability. Look at 2 Peter 3:17-18. There are several illusions that weak Christians who don't assemble have, and one of the most common illusions is that they know much more about the Bible than they actually do. They think they already know everything about the Bible that they need to know, so they don't come to that Wednesday night Bible study. The problem with that is that we might know enough about the Bible when the skies are blue and the sun is shining and Satan is nowhere to be found, but we don't know enough about the Bible when the storms come and the devil is on the attack. When we face temptation, can we cite book, chapter, and verse to the devil and say, "It is written"? When we face hard times in our lives, have we built our faith enough to remain true to the Lord? Christians who have learned and grown in the assembly can do those things. Christians who haven't learned and grown, can't.
- C. Second, spiritual growth makes us useful in the kingdom. Consider the Hebrews writer's comments about this in Hebrews 5:11-12. Specifically, this passage explores the problems that the Hebrews were having with teaching. They'd been Christians for enough time that they should have grown to be teachers, but they were in need of being taught again instead. I don't think it's coincidence that Hebrews is also the book that warns against forsaking the assembly. Just as God expected the Hebrews to be useful, He expects us to be useful. This doesn't necessarily mean that we have to be teachers. Not everybody has that gift. However, everybody has some gift that God means to help the church. The way that we get to the point where we CAN help the church is through spiritual growth. Just like an apple tree isn't going to bear apples the first year we plant it, we aren't going to bear fruit for God when we are still immature. The way to solve the immaturity problem is by assembling, feeding on the word, and allowing God to guide us to where we need to be.
- D. Finally, spiritual growth is important because it is the foundation for more spiritual growth. Only as we come to understand the easy things in Scripture can we progress to understand the more difficult things. The Hebrews writer actually makes this point in the next two verses after the ones we just looked at, in Hebrews 5:13-14. The best example of this that I can think of is the way that people today deal with the book of Revelation. Revelation has fascinated people for centuries because of all the cool imagery and scary prophecies. However, most of those who study it don't have the Bible background or the spiritual maturity to understand it. That's why we get all these folks who think that the collapse of the banking system is a sign of the end times, or worse still, that whatever new crisis is going on in the Middle East is proof that Christ is about to begin His thousand-year reign on earth. Friends, if we start reading the Bible at Revelation, and then try to make everything else in the Bible fit into our goofy interpretation of Revelation, we will quite literally miss the entire point of the Bible. We should never start with the difficult passages first. We should start with the easy passages, grow into them, and then use our spiritual maturity to grasp the more challenging parts.

III. Motivations for Today.

- A. So, then; we see that the assembly is the best place to learn about the word, and that learning about the word produces all kinds of benefits in our lives. If we aren't people who are here every time the doors are open, what we need today is to find some motivation that will change our hearts so that we WILL be here.
- B. The Bible points to many reasons to assemble, but one of the best is given in Matthew 5:6. If we aren't assembling as regularly as we should, we need to develop a hunger and thirst for righteousness. One of the fascinating trends that I've noticed during my time as a preacher is this: when I'm talking to somebody, whether Christian or non-Christian, and they don't want to come to services, one of the things they'll often start in on is telling me how clean they're already living, with the implication that they're doing just fine without the assembly and don't need its help. Friends, that attitude represents a lot of different things, but it is NOT hunger and thirst for righteousness. There is no possible way that we can defend our own human righteousness in the light of God's word. Nobody can read what the Bible says about Jesus and say, "Yep; I'm doing all those things." Instead, we need to be honest about what the word teaches about where we should be, and we need to be honest about how far away we are. All of us are miles away from living like Christ, and we must long to be closer. We must hunger and thirst to be like Him, and failing that, we must hunger and thirst for the grace He bestows. If we have that hunger and thirst, we will assemble like we should.
- C. Finally, though, our desire to be useful in the body should move us to come together with the saints. Let's look at what Paul writes about the connection between the word, growth, and usefulness in Ephesians 4:15-16. It starts off with speaking the truth in love, with us learning about what God wants us to be. Then, we grow to become like Christ. At the last, once we have grown, that's when we can take our place in the effective working of the body. A lot of Christians want to be effective workers. They want to be elders or deacons or personal workers or what have you. That's a wonderful ambition to have. However, the only way for us to reach the point where we are useful is through assembling. Here, more than anywhere else, is where we find the word that will feed us. It's that feeding that will make us ready for the work.

Conclusion. If you want to become part of the Lord's body, repent and come to Him today.