

Nobody's Business?

By Allen Dvorak

One characteristic of New Testament Christians is that they met together regularly. When the church was comprised just of the saints in Jerusalem, they met in the temple for worship (Acts 2:42, 46; 5:12). As Luke recorded, the gospel spread from Jerusalem to other parts of Palestine and from there to all other parts of the world (Acts 1:8). As churches (local congregations) were established through the preaching of the gospel, they received letters from various individuals guided by the Holy Spirit. From these letters we learn about the worship and edification of these churches.

One thing that clearly stands out in these epistles is that the early Christians assembled together regularly for worship and edification. The Corinthians were commanded to give as they had been prospered when they came together on the first day of the week (1 Corinthians 16:1-2). They came together as a church to eat the Lord's Supper, although they needed to be corrected with regard to their practice (1 Corinthians 11:17-34). In Paul's discussion of the exercise of miraculous spiritual gifts, it is obvious that the Corinthian church was accustomed to assembling for edification (1 Corinthians 14:23-33). Although they needed to make corrections in their practice, as with their Lord's Supper observance, the fact remains that the church came together regularly for edification.

It wasn't just the Corinthians who assembled as a church. Other congregations had been given the same instructions regarding giving (1 Corinthians 16:1-2). The church at Troas also assembled on the first day of the week to participate in the Lord's Supper (Acts 20:7). The Hebrew Christians were encouraged to "consider one another in order to stir up love and good works" and were not to "forsake the assembling of themselves together" as some had apparently already done (Hebrews 10:24-25).

Paul wrote to the Ephesians and Colossians regarding a responsibility that they had to one another, i.e., to admonish one another in song (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16). Various other passages indicate that the members of a local congregation have responsibilities to one another, although not all of their responsibilities are fulfilled in the context of assemblies (e.g., 1 Thessalonians 5:14).

Paul employed the figure of a physical body to emphasize the connection between members of a local congregation (1 Corinthians 12:14-27). Like the physical body, each member is affected by what happens to the other members (read especially verses 25-26). Paul also used the figure of the physical body in his letter to the Ephesians, noting that the whole body is "joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love" (4:16).

One of the fundamental truths of the New Testament is that members of a local congregation have responsibilities to one another. We are not all "islands to ourselves." Even the terms used to describe individual Christians, "brother" and "sister", reflect a spiritual familial relationship. Not only are Christians children of the same Father, but they are expected to care for one another (1 Corinthians 12:25).

The Lord's plan for local congregations also includes the oversight of each congregation by qualified men known as elders or bishops. These men have the responsibility of watching out for the souls

of those Christians who are members of the local congregation (Hebrews 13:17). That role requires that the elders be concerned about signs of spiritual weakness in any of the members. They are to shepherd the local flock (1 Peter 5:2), a task which involves guiding, protecting, nurturing and feeding those Christians which make up that flock (Acts 20:28-31).

At the same time that the overseers of the local church should be looking out for the flock, the members of that flock, as already noted, are to submit to the elders. The author of Hebrews instructed his readers to “obey those who rule over you, and be submissive” (13:17). Elsewhere the apostle Paul described elders as those who “rule” the local church (1 Timothy 5:17; implied in 3:4-5).

In light of these truths, it is incredible that occasionally a member of a local church will affirm that “it’s nobody’s business” if he misses assemblies of the church or decides to leave the congregation to join himself to some other group. It is as though someone has decided to isolate himself from the rest of his physical family and yet expects that no one will question or notice his absence or want to know why he has left. No physical family would accept such behavior as normal. Why do some Christians seem to believe that such behavior is appropriate in their spiritual family?

Part of the elders’ role requires that they recognize indicators of spiritual weakness. One of the most common signs of spiritual weakness is the failure to attend the assemblies of the local church. Christians who absent themselves from the assemblies without cause not only deliberately deprive themselves of the teaching done on those occasions, but also of the good influence of fellow Christians. Often the influence of worldly people is increasing in the Christian’s life at the same time. The spirit becomes weaker and the flesh becomes stronger. Don’t elders and other members have the right to be concerned when they see this process taking place in the life of a brother or sister? Certainly they do!

If Christians are to submit to the elders of the congregation, why would any Christian act as though he has no obligation to talk with the elders if he decides to leave the congregation? If members are to care for one another, it is entirely reasonable for other members to know why one member has decided to leave the congregation.

There are some organizations to which we may belong and yet have virtually no responsibilities, no commitment of time or energy (e.g., honor societies). According to the teaching of the New Testament, the church of the Lord is not one of them!

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