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Allen Black

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New Testament Descriptions of Early Christian Assemblies

Allen Black

If we want the New Testament to be the foundational document and source of authority for the church, it is vitally important that we have sufficient knowledge of its descriptions of the purposes and practices of the early church.

We might have hoped for a biblical text that would provide a systematic discussion of the Christian assembly, but as is the case with many other subjects, there is no such thing. What the New Testament does provide are ad hoc comments on various aspects of Christian assemblies, either in the context of a broader narrative (e.g., Acts 20:7) or in reply to specific problems (e.g., 1 Cor 14). In order to get as clear a picture of early Christian practice as possible, I have collected and categorized those ad hoc comments. Although the process is certainly subject to error, my conclusions are similar to those of others who have employed a comparable process.¹

It is important to note that the following comments are not based on just any texts that refer to gatherings of Christians. Rather, I have tried to select those texts in which Christians gathered as the church (cf. 1 Cor 11:18, “when you come together as a church”).² Furthermore, I do not mean to imply that all of the activities listed took place in every such assembly (e.g., appointment of elders, which took place irregularly) or that there was no diversity of practice in the early church (e.g., between the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem and the largely Gentile churches in Corinth).

edification
Since most of the specific practices of the early assemblies accomplished more than one purpose (e.g., singing may at one time thank God and admonish others, Col 3:16), it is helpful to begin with a classification of pur-

poses. The one purpose clearly articulated for early Christian assemblies is edification, or building up the church. In 1 Corinthians 14 Paul uses this goal as a guide for determining what should be done in the Corinthians’ assemblies. For example, tongue-speaking should not be done if there is no interpreter, because “if in a tongue you utter speech that is not intelligible, how will anyone know what is being said? You will be speaking into the air” (1 Cor 14:9). Paul believes that what is done in the church must follow the maxim “Let all things be done for building up” (1 Cor 14:26).

worship
However, it would be a mistake to think that edification is the sole purpose and criterion for what is done in church.³ 1 Corinthians 14, with its focus on tongue-speaking versus prophecy, uses this criterion heavily. But even in this chapter there are allusions to the God-ward, worshipful dimension of the assembly (vv. 16, 25). New Testament assemblies should be seen in continuity with the emphases of assemblies in the Old Testament, in the synagogue, and in the post-apostolic church.⁴ In the book of Acts, corporate acts of praise and prayer are mentioned in 2:42, 46–47; 4:23–31; 12:12; and 13:1–3.⁵ The central goals of early Christian assemblies were not only horizontal (edification), but also vertical (worship).

evangelism
But two other purposes deserve mention. One is evangelism. The New Testament evidence of an evangelistic purpose for the Christian assembly is surprisingly weak. In Acts the message is proclaimed to outsiders in the temple precincts, synagogues, marketplaces, and homes. Evangelism is not explicitly referred to as part of a Christian assembly per se. However, specific proof texts are not

necessary. Could Christians have gone into all the world proclaiming the gospel and yet have ignored those outsiders who came into their own assemblies? 1 Cor 14:23–25 shows that they did not. One of Paul’s concerns with regard to the use of tongue-speaking at Corinth is the impression it will make upon outsiders. He suggests that prophecy would be more likely to bring the unbeliever to his knees before God. Although evangelism should not take precedence over worship and edification as the purpose for the majority of Christian assemblies, it should not be ignored in any assembly that includes outsiders.⁶

meeting institutional needs
Other activities known to have been practiced in some early Christian assemblies may be encompassed under the rubric of institutional activities. Examples include the ordination of elders (Acts 14:23) and the collection of funds for special contributions (1 Cor 16:1–2).⁷

In sum, we can identify four purposes for activities in the early Christian assemblies: worship, edification, evangelism, and fulfilling institutional needs. Biblical theology indicates that we should emphasize worship. Specific New Testament references put emphasis on edification. Theological rationales suggest that some assemblies might emphasize evangelism, with 1 Cor 14:23–25 providing a specific instance of the need to be cognizant of outsiders. Finally, New Testament examples affirm the practical necessity of giving some attention to institutional needs.

Many, if not most, of the specific activities in Christian assemblies have to do with more than one of these broad purposes. For example, Eph 5:19–20 and Col 3:16 describe Christian hymnody as directed both to each other and to God. In 1 Cor 14:24–25 an unbeliever is evangelized by prophetic pronouncements that are presumably directed primarily at believers. And 2 Cor 9:11–13 speaks of giving that results in thanksgiving and praise to God.

In 1 Corinthians 11–14 Paul provides us with the New Testament’s longest treatment of Christian assemblies. Although by no means a systematic treatment of the assembly, Paul’s response to various problems at Corinth is helpful in identifying specific assembly activities practiced by the early Christians.

In 1 Cor 11:20 Paul says, “When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord’s Supper.” He implies that it should be. His description of the Supper suggests that it involves worship, edification, and, to some extent, evangelism (“you proclaim the Lord’s death”). Obviously, at Corinth the Supper was celebrated in the context of a meal.

Paul’s advice to the Corinthians to eat at home (11:34) seems to be based on disapproval, not of the association of the Supper with a meal, but rather of the manner in which they were conducting the meal. (After all, Jesus instituted the Supper in connection with the Passover meal.) Unfortunately, there is ambiguity in the New Testament texts (see also Acts 2:42–46; 20:7, 11; Jude 12), which suggest that early Christians might have commonly taken the Supper in connection with a meal. They certainly gathered both to eat the Supper and to share meals. The extent to which they combined the two is open to question.

Chapter 12 identifies a number of gifts, some of which chapter 14 associates with the assembly. It is clear from chapter 14 that the assemblies at Corinth involved speaking in tongues, interpreting tongues, and prophesying. Whether the gifts of healing or miracle working were practiced in the assemblies, we are not told.

Although the gifts of tongue-speaking and prophecy were pursued avidly in the Corinthian assemblies, it is not clear whether these practices were as common in other churches. Perhaps they were. But it should be noted that the Corinthians were overly zealous for gifts, especially the gift of tongues, and that Paul, while declaring that he could speak in tongues more than any of them, says that he preferred not to do so in church (1 Cor 14:18–19).

Closely related to tongue-speaking and prophecy are other forms of exhortation and instruction. Preaching, teaching, exhorting, rebuking, Scripture reading, etc., are amply witnessed as activities of the early Christian assemblies (e.g., Acts 2:42; 20:7; 1 Tim 4:13; 2 Tim 4:2).

The ad hoc nature of the discussion of the assembly in 1 Corinthians 14 is illustrated by the fact that two of the central elements of early Christian worship—prayer and singing—are mentioned only in passing. In verses 13–15 Paul mentions prayer in connection with tongue-speaking (which can be prayer). The book of Acts illustrates the centrality of prayer in the early church and its assemblies (Acts 1:14; 2:42; 4:23–24; 6:4, 6; 12:5, 12; etc.).

Verses 15 and 26 of 1 Corinthians 14 make passing reference to singing. The key New Testament texts on singing are, of course, Eph 5:19–20 and Col 3:16–17. Although both contexts refer to daily life, it would be absurd to assume that Christians sang psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to each other in everyday living but not in their assemblies. It might be noted that the phrase “to one another” does not necessarily mean simultaneously (cf. Heb

3:13, “exhort one another”; Col 3:13, “forgive one another”). If 1 Cor 14:26 suggests that one could provide a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation to the others, it also suggests that one could sing a hymn to the others.

The Supper, various forms of teaching or exhorting, prayer, and singing were probably constant practices in the regular assemblies of early churches. Greeting other Christians with a holy kiss may have been a universal practice as well (Rom 16:16; 1 Pet 5:14; et al.). The New Testament testifies to other practices that were more occasional. I have already referred to the special collection Paul took up for the churches of Judea. Other ad hoc activities included appointment of elders or missionaries (Acts 13:2–3; 14:23); discipline of members (1 Cor 5:4–5; 1 Tim 5:20); and organization of what we would call ministries (Acts 6:2–6). Agabus may have been in an assembly when he bound himself with Paul’s belt, a prophetic act we would label drama (Acts 21:10–14). Although the New Testament does not refer to such, presumably some baptisms also occurred in the context of the assembly (see note 6).

Guidelines for current practices in the assembly ought to be sought in the purposes and practices identifiable in the New Testament. However, since the New Testament does not provide a focused discussion of purposes or practices, we should allow some room for discussion. We have discontinued some New Testament practices (e.g., tongue-speaking); we have altered the form of others to fit our cultural setting (e.g., handshakes instead of kisses or four-part harmony instead of unison singing). Furthermore, we have incorporated into our practices aids that were not available to the early Christians (e.g., print songbooks, overhead projectors, or video clips). But their purposes are still ours and their practices provide important precedents for what we should do.

Many of our current discussions are essentially about generational preferences (e.g., preferences for old songs

or new songs). It may be helpful to remember that in most cases, none of the disputants in our current arguments can claim that the early churches followed their particular preferences. It is difficult for us to imagine assemblies in individual homes, without pews or folding chairs, without songbooks or overhead projectors, without the songs or singing styles we prefer, without communion trays, without an order of service, etc. We need not replicate every aspect of those early assemblies. But we do need to accomplish what they accomplished. May our assemblies excel in worshipping God, in edifying each other, and in reaching the outsider, and may we conduct our “church business” in a way that pleases our Lord.

ALLEN BLACK teaches New Testament at Harding University Graduate School of Religion, Memphis, Tennessee.

Notes

¹Cf. John M. Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1996), 51–61; Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 243–80, 310–18, 377–86.

²See also 1 Cor 11:20; 14:23, 34.

³As in Ervin Bishop, “The Assembly,” *Restoration Quarterly* 18 (1975): 219–28.

⁴So Rob McRay, “The Holy and Human in Worship: Can Biblical Worship Be Reverent and Relevant?” (Christian Scholars Conference, Harding University, 1993), 11. For the early second century, McRay cites *Ignatius to the Ephesians* 13.1: “Seek, then, to come together more frequently to give thanks and glory to God.”

⁵*Ibid.*, 11.

⁶Similarly, one looks in vain for a proof text that states that a baptism occurred in an early Christian assembly. However, when an unbeliever bowed before God and declared that God was among the Christians (1 Cor 14:25), baptism would soon follow. The ritual immersion pools in many Jewish homes could have provided built-in baptisteries for house churches.

⁷Incidentally, there are no New Testament references to a weekly contribution for ongoing expenses. However, 1 Corinthians 16 does provide a precedent for when such a collection might be taken.