



What makes a meeting an assembly gathering?

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A survey of the *Acts of the Apostles* and the Pauline epistles reveals that churches in the first century assembled for a variety of regular meetings, among them; prayer meetings, Bible teaching meetings and, of course, the Lord's Supper.¹ On such occasions a whole local church would come together "into one place".²

Paul the apostle described attending such meetings as being "in church",³ an expression helpfully explained by Jack Hunter:

"...'*in church*' with no article...refers to the assembled gathering. We always belong to the local assembly, but we are only '*in assembly*' when we gather."⁴

Since being "in church" means *meeting in church capacity*, how does one determine when a group of believers is fulfilling that function? Exactly what makes a meeting of Christians a 'church gathering'?

- When a group of Christian friends comes to your home for a meal and some hymn singing, is that "in church"?
- When a number of believers meet up at work during lunch break for a time of fellowship, is that "in church"?
- When, on a cruise holiday, a few Christian couples get together for some Sunday devotions, is that "in church"?

To decide if a meeting qualifies as a church gathering, the New Testament supplies us with 5 key principles:

1. The gathering principle must be scriptural
2. The gathering purpose must be spiritual
3. The gathering place must be physical
4. The gathering pattern must be biblical
5. The gathered persons must be in the plural (and inclusive)

First, the gathering principle must be scriptural.

Matthew 18 is the first chapter in the New Testament to mention the local assembly. At the end of a paragraph about conflict resolution between believers, the Lord outlines a *particular* promise; "...if

two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of My Father which is in heaven" (v19). The next verse begins with the word "for", and is designed to explain how we can know that the *particular* promise of v19 is true. In other words, the people in v19 had the authority to act as they did in their particular situation *because* "where [any] two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them" (v20).⁵ Note therefore that v20 serves as a *general* promise, given to support the *particular* promise of verse 19.⁶ Thus Matthew 18:20 can and should be taken as *the basic gathering principle* for all local New Testament assemblies, at all times, in all places.

But what exactly does it mean to *gather together in Christ's name*? In Matthew 18:20, the phrase is actually "into My name" (Gk. eis/into), an expression used commonly in Bible times in financial transactions.⁷ One could make a payment 'into the account of' or 'into the name' of someone, or even transfer a property deed *into someone's name*, a turn of phrase still common today. What is the significance of this? Once money or property has been transferred 'into a person's name', that person has exclusive ownership of and sole authority over it. Thus, to gather "into Christ's name" means to gather under His sole ownership and authority, governed by His Word alone. This is the one and only true ground of gathering for assemblies of Christians today.⁸

It's not difficult to see the ramifications of this principle. If a church claims to gather in Christ's authority - as all churches do - yet in reality derives its authority to gather from a secondary or additional human source, it cannot claim to be gathering in Christ's name alone. A church's ground of gathering is not an ecclesiastical headquarters (Canterbury, Rome, Sydney etc.), nor a historical leader (Wesley, Luther, Darby etc.), nor a particular Bible doctrine (baptism, presbyters, the one body, etc.), nor even a confession of faith (Westminster, Belgic, Augsburg, etc.). To be legitimate, an assembly gathering must be convened in the authority of the Lord Jesus alone.

Second, the gathering purpose must be spiritual.

It is important to clearly distinguish between a social get-together and a spiritual gathering together. In the New Testament, the gatherings of the Lord's people - in His name, with the Lord in the midst, guided by overseers - were all *spiritual in nature and purpose*. For example, in Acts 20:7 they came together to break bread (spiritual); in Acts 4:24 they came together to pray (spiritual); in Acts 11:26 they came together to hear the Bible taught (spiritual). In 1 Corinthians 14 Paul envisages the whole church gathered in one place for praise, thanksgiving, singing and ministry (all spiritual activities). What's the point? Even if an entire local church is gathered together in one place, *unless the purpose of the gathering is spiritual*, they are not "in church". Neither a 'church bus trip' nor a 'church picnic' is an 'assembly gathering', *even though all of the local assembly's members may be present*.

Third, the gathering place must be physical.

A local church must be physically gathered together in one location before it can claim to be meeting "in church". 1 Corinthians 14:23 is clear; "If therefore the whole church be come together into one place". It was in that one place that visitors realised "God is in [among] you" (v25).⁹

Matthew 18:20 uses 4 spatial words or phrases: "where", "there", "gathered together" and "in the midst". Unless you have a "where" you cannot have a "there". That's why it is important to distinguish between the Lord being *with a Christian individually*, and the Lord *dwelling in the midst of a local assembly*. The Lord being *in a particular place* - in contrast to his constant essential omnipresence - is a concept seen throughout Scripture in, for example, the Garden of Eden, the burning bush, and the Tabernacle of Moses.

This brings clarity to the debate about "internet church". Few people doubt the benefit of local assemblies providing written, audio and video ministry online. In essence this is no different from printing and publishing books and magazines, something happily engaged in for decades. However, 'online meetings' are a different matter, one that needs to be carefully thought through. When meetings were prohibited by government decree during the Covid-19 pandemic, video-conferencing systems (Google Meet, Cisco, Zoom etc.) proved a useful emergency tool for the broadcasting of ministry and the easing of feelings of isolation: but are such sessions 'assembly gatherings'? Apart from the fact that you can't baptise online, nor break the one common loaf online, nor carry out church discipline online, etc., the main issue is: if the Lord's presence is *in the place* where His people gather, in a digital church *where is that place*? Is God's presence in your monitor? In your screen? On your phone? Are we to believe that He who once dwelt between the cherubim¹⁰ now dwells on the internet? Remember, an online video 'meeting' is nothing more than a phone call with picture. The reality is, the logged-in devices are all located *in different places*. Hence "online church" is, biblically speaking, a contradiction in terms,¹¹ for without the Lord in the midst of a physically gathered company, there can be no "assembly meeting".

Consider this: why did God insist, under the old covenant, that every Israelite stop work and *physically* travel to Jerusalem three times a year, even promising to protect their lands during their time away?¹² Bearing in mind the inconvenience, and the cost in time, effort and money, the Lord clearly viewed *a commitment to be physically present* at the "holy convocations of Jehovah" as a non-negotiable priority. A more convenient live-streamed holy convocation, had it been available, may have garnered larger viewing numbers, but in terms of impact and the intended inculcation of the importance of the house of God into a rising generation, it would have come up short, aside from robbing God of His due.

The beneficial effects of companies of God's people being *physically* together for times of teaching, worship, prayer and singing, are immeasurable. Attempting to replicate 'church' virtually is not only less than ideal - it tends to undermine the real thing. It is a plain fact that the older generation, who in their early days walked miles to meetings through rain and snow, developed a life-long appreciation of the local assembly that a generation raised on "live-stream church" never can and never will. In summary: to qualify as an assembly gathering, the gathering place must be physical.

Fourth, the gathering pattern must be biblical.

The New Testament gives us a pattern (blueprint) for how a local assembly should gather. We are told in detail "*how to build*" and "*how to conduct ourselves*".¹³ If a group of believers professes to be meeting "in church capacity", there must be faithful adherence to the New Testament pattern, including, for example, a plurality of elders, a weekly breaking of bread, the teaching of the Word of God, congregational singing, church discipline, and the carrying out of the different but complementary 'headship roles' of male and female (as well as their symbolic display).

In the wilderness, circa 1,500 B.C., after laboriously constructing all of its detailed and varied components, the day finally came for the Tabernacle of Moses to be "reared up". Each item was put in its place strictly "as the Lord commanded Moses".¹⁴ Then, and only then, did "the glory of the Lord [fill] the Tabernacle". Note the way Hebrews 8 puts it: "...Moses was warned [by God] when he was about to complete the tabernacle...'Be careful that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown to you on the mountain'."¹⁵ Simply put, divine commands, rather than man-made suggestions, directed the construction and conduct of God's house in the Old Testament.

The coming of the gospel era has changed nothing as far as that particular principle is concerned. The New Testament is clear: *how a local assembly functions is a matter of principle not preference.*

The apostle Paul actually uses the word "commandment" in relation to the functions of the local assembly. After writing at length about the conduct of assembly gatherings - who takes part, how they take part, when they take part, the saying of "Amen", the singing of hymns, etc. - Paul says "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*."¹⁶ To be recognised as an 'assembly meeting', a gathering must function in accordance with the New Testament pattern.¹⁷

Fifth, the gathered persons must be in the plural (and inclusive).

If the 21st century is anything, it is *the century of the self*. People's collective responsibilities - to the family, the government and the local church - have become subservient to their autonomous rights and preferences. What does that sound like? "*I can be 'the church at the beach' or 'the church on the golf course' just as easily as sitting in a pew.*"

Sadly, that is an all too commonly heard sentiment today. However, scripturally, you can't have 'church' on your own. You can't have your very own little 'communion service' in your home. Remember, the word "church" (Gk. *ekklesia*) means 'a called-out assembly', and one person is not an assembly! Indeed, the oft-used Bible verbs "come together" and "gather together" completely lose their meaning in a 'one-person-church'. The entire New Testament concept of 'church' demands a collective interpretation.

One more thing. The persons in an assembly gathering must not only be in the plural, but also inclusive. Note the expression "the whole church".¹⁸ We live in the era of house groups,¹⁹ men's breakfasts and women's Bible studies, yet we profess to follow a Bible that contains *no gender-specific or age-specific meetings for Christians*. While not everyone may come on every occasion, meetings should certainly be open to all - sheep and lambs all feeding together. The example set in the days of Ezra is most helpful:

"Now when Ezra had prayed, and when he had confessed, weeping and casting himself down before the house of God, there assembled unto him out of Israel a very great congregation *of men and women and children*"²⁰ (emphasis added).

This principle need not apply in gospel work of course. Preaching the gospel to children in a Sunday School or to senior citizens in a Care Home is happily in line with apostolic precedent. Paul spoke to a group of *unsaved women* at a river side (Acts 16:13-14) and to a group of *unsaved men* in Athens (Acts 17:22); to a group of *unsaved Jews* in a synagogue (Acts 13:14-15) and to a group of *unsaved Gentiles* in a theatre (Acts 19:30), even though He never spoke to age-specific or gender-specific *groups of Christians* (other than elders of assemblies).²¹

Of course, some welcome the fact that a gender-specific meeting of believers is "not an assembly gathering" because that means 'assembly rules' don't apply: "we are free to do as we please"! But this misses the point entirely. It is not that there are an endless variety of meetings that Christians can have, but only 3 are 'assembly gatherings' (where head coverings and sisters' silence apply). The fact is, outside of the New Testament's prescribed 'assembly gatherings', we have no authority for any other corporate gatherings of God's people for worship, prayer and ministry. Period. The real question to be faced is therefore; "What biblical authority is there for 'non-assembly gatherings' of believers for prayer and Bible teaching?"

In 1683 John Bunyan wrote *The Case of a Conscience Resolved* with the glorious subtitle: *Whether, where a church of Christ is situate, it is the duty of the woman of that congregation, ordinarily, and by appointment, to separate themselves from their brethren, and so to assemble together, to*

perform some parts of divine worship, as prayer, etc. without their men?. Put simply, Bunyan was asking, 'Are sisters' meetings scriptural?'. Here is one paragraph from Bunyan's book-length reply:

"To gather in Christ's name is to gather together by His authority; that is, by His law and commandment. But we have no law of Christ, nor commandment, that the women of this or that church, should separate themselves from their brethren, to maintain meetings among themselves, for the performing of divine worship: and therefore, such meetings cannot be in His name; that is, by His authority, law, and commandment; and so ought not to be at all."

This argument of Bunyan's neatly ties together our first and fifth point. The gathering principle speaks to the make-up of the gathered persons.

And so, in summary, if the gathering principle is scriptural, and the gathering purpose is spiritual, and the gathering place is physical, and the gathering pattern is biblical, and the gathered persons are in the plural and inclusive, *that* is an assembly gathering.

(This article appeared in the Believer's Magazine in July 2021. It can also be viewed online at: <https://www.webtruth.org/church-issues/what-makes-a-meeting-an-assembly-gathering/>)

Notes:

1. Held separately or together. See Acts 19, 1 Cor 14 etc.
2. 1 Cor 14:23. Paul uses the verb "come together" (*sunerchomai*) 7 times in 1 Corinthians in relation to the local assembly (11:17, 18, 20, 33, 34, 14:23, 26). This is equivalent to being "gathered together" (*sunago*), used in 1 Cor 5:4 and Matt 18:20.
3. In the New Testament there are 4 uses of "in church" without the definite article (*en ekklesia*), all in 1 Corinthians and all in the section focusing on the meetings of an assembly (11:18, 14:18, 19, 28).
4. Jack Hunter, *What the Bible Teaches, 1 Corinthians*, (Kilmarnock, Scotland: John Ritchie Ltd., 1986), p. 169.
5. Even if it is just a meeting of two or three brethren, or assembly elders, to discuss an assembly discipline issue, as in the immediate context.
6. The verbal aspect of "are gathered" (*sunago*) in Matt 18:20 (a perfect passive participle) describes the history of an assembly's past and current gathering. Such a verbal aspect would not be used if the verse was describing a single ad hoc meeting, rather than a delineating a principle with a wider application. See Acts 4:31 and Acts 20:8 for two other examples of this exact form of *sunago*.
7. "The phrase *eis (to) onoma tinos* is frequent in the papyri with reference to payments made 'to the account of any one'...The usage is of interest in connection with Matt 28:19, where the meaning would seem to be 'baptized into the possession of the Father, etc.'." Moulton and Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament*, (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1914-1929), p. 451.
8. The phrase "into My name" (Gk. *eis/into*) is also used of salvation (John 1:12; 2:23; 3:18, 1 John 5:18) and baptism (Matt 28:19, Acts 8:16, 19:5, 1 Cor 1:13, 15), where association with and acknowledgement of the authority and ownership of Christ are likewise in view. One other occurrence in the New Testament - Heb 6:10 - carries a different meaning where the preposition *eis* bears the meaning of "with reference to [My name]".
9. 'Place' can mean a building, a house, a clearing in the woods, or where ever, as long as it is a physical place.

10. 2 Samuel 6:2, Psalm 80:1.
11. In a situation where a physically gathered meeting is live-streamed to viewers at home, remote participation should not be allowed. Participation requires a person's presence. This principle means, among other things, that the emblems of the Lord's Supper should not be taken and given to people unable to be present in person.
12. Deuteronomy 16:16, Exodus 34:24.
13. 1 Corinthians 3:10, 1 Timothy 3:15.
14. Exodus 40:19, 21, 23, 25, 27 and 32.
15. Hebrews 8:5 HCSB.
16. 1 Corinthians 14:37.
17. Some claim that since Paul refers to the assembly at Corinth - despite its shortcomings - as "inner temple of God" (1 Cor 3:16), no violation of the New Testament assembly pattern affects the presence of the Lord. Against that, note: 1. the Corinthian assembly was originally based on a true foundation (1 Cor 3:10), and 2. when an assembly refuses to repent it invites the discipline of the Lord and the removal of the lampstand (See Revelation Chs 2 and 3).
18. 1 Corinthians 14:23.
19. Paul's reference to "the church that is in your house" (Phm 1:2) is not a precedent for "house groups". Paul is referring to *a whole church* meeting in Philemon's house, not one of several separated "house groups" meeting in different locations.
20. Ezra 10:1.
21. Acts 20:17.