

Fundamentals On The Church And Our Assembling Together

Over the last number of months, we have all faced issues and challenges that are new to us. This pertains to how we work, socialize, and worship. Due to the pandemic many congregations have not worshipped in their buildings. Some had on-line services, some had parking lot services, and some met in smaller groups at various members houses. This brings to mind thoughts about the church that we may know but forget or do not understand.

There is a difference between “forsaking” and not being able to meet together. **“And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.” (Hebrews 10:24- 25).** Forsaking is the intentional desire and decision to not meet together. While there are situations which arise where one is not able to do.

As congregations were gathering money to send to the needy saints at Jerusalem, the Apostle Paul stated a very important principle. **“For if there is first a willing mind, it is accepted according to what one has, and not according to what he does not have.” (2 Corinthians 8:12).** We might say we were “providentially hindered” from doing. In times past services have been cancelled due to weather that threaten the building or access to the building. Members miss due to personal illness or for the care of a sick relative. We understand in those situations the desire to assemble should always be there but the ability is limited or does not exist.

Why did congregations cancel their services over the last three months? The principle is our desire to protect others from getting the virus then spreading it to more people. **“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matthew 22.39).** No one in March or early April thought the shutdown would last much like cancelling services due to a snow storm or flooding.

Another lesson this teaches us is, the church is not the building. This was stressed in times past. If someone would happen to say, “I am going to church” someone else would often say, “You are going to the church building.”

Children learned at an early age the difference between the church and a building. The church refers to the people and the church building is an expedient aid for Christians to meet together.

The church, the ekklesia, is what Jesus came to establish, Matthew 16.18. It is composed of the saved, Acts 2.47. It is what Jesus purchased with His blood on the cross, Acts 20.28. Jesus did not come to build a building, save a building, or purchase brick and wood.

This distinction is important because society associates the building as the church. But the church can meet together with or without owning a building. In Acts 16 we read of the conversion of Lydia and her household. **“And on the Sabbath day we went out of the city to the riverside, where prayer was customarily made; and we sat down and spoke to the women who met there. Now a certain woman named Lydia heard us. She was a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira, who worshiped God. The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul.” (Acts 16:13-14).** Where did Lydia and her household meet after they obeyed the Gospel? It could have been by the riverside, in her house, or somewhere else. Worship is not limited to a building. Some congregations have parking lot services with P.A. systems, while others used FM transmitters and members stayed in their cars. Congregations meet in open fields or in barns. Isn't this the point Jesus was making to the Samaritan woman in John 4? **"But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth." John 4:23-24).**

A final point I want to make is the autonomous nature of local congregations. Autonomy is defined as the right or condition of self-government. This pertains to local congregations as the “universal church” (all of the saved in Christ) which does not meet together in one place. But saints in local places met together to worship and work together in the Book of Acts and in letters written by inspired men to local congregations. Local congregations are bound by the law of Christ. Those congregations have their own members, treasury, and work. They also make decisions pertaining to their members. Elders are

given that role and limited to the local congregations or which are the members. **“The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: 2a Shepherd the flock of God which is among you” (1 Peter 5:1-2a, emphasis mine, D.T.).** Universal bishops, conventions, etc. cannot bind multiple congregations together in their work. They do not exist in His Church.

Therefore, each congregation must decide for itself whether to meet together and how to do so. Also, each congregation has its own members and circumstances to consider. Different states had different guidelines, some congregations fill their buildings and makes social distancing impossible while others have plenty of room. There is no headquarter to call or council to contact to see whether or not we should meet together. Such decisions are made on the congregational level. The local congregation is the largest unit one can find in the New Testament pertaining to the saints and their worship to God. – Dennis Tucker