

PRINCIPLES

Governing the Public Assembly of The Church

THE CHURCH is called “the church” in an assembled sense in the New Testament (I Corinthians 14:34; Colossians 4:16; etc.), as well as in other ways. In fact, “assembly” would be a good translation of *ekklesia* (the Greek word commonly rendered “church”).

It is the Lord’s plan that the community of believers come together for worship and edification. In the early days of the church, they came together on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2; etc.), as well as more frequently some times (Acts 2:46; Acts 11:26). In fact, they were (and we are) commanded, “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 10:25, NKJV).

There are certain principles that can be gleaned from the Scriptures that should govern the public assembly of the church. The public assembly of the church should be carried on in keeping with the high and holy purpose of the church as taught throughout the New Testament.

This article will not have to do with the particulars of what is to be done in the public assembly, but principles that should govern what is done.

I. THE PRIMARY PURPOSE OF THE PUBLIC ASSEMBLY IS FOR THE BELIEVERS

It is good to keep in mind that the public assembly of the church is for believers, the saints, not for the world. This statement may sound very elementary, and strange to some, but it seems many do not have this understanding today (and what is implied). In too many places the assembly has become the primary (if not the only) tool of evangelism. The gospel is not personally taken into the community. Then, forgetting the assembly is for Christians, some have non-Christian singing groups “perform” religiously before the church (as well as having denominational speakers). We could go on.

Acts 20:7 states that “the disciples came together to break bread upon the first day of the week.” Disciples, we remind you, are Christians (Acts 11:26). The admonition in Hebrews 10:25, “not forsaking the assembling” of themselves together, was for Christians, not non-Christians. Likewise, the admonition in Colossians 3:16, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord,” was (is) to Christians. Certainly we would not prohibit non-Christians from informally taking part in the congregational singing (that is between them and the Lord), but to have them stand before the church “teaching and admonishing” in “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” is another thing. Christians are the teachers in the church, and how can a sinner admonish us spiritually? That which should be worship is reduced to entertainment.

Other things could be said. But let us remember the simple truth that the assembly is for the saints, and let us keep the high level of spirituality that should be there. Too many times today in more ways than one there is no boundary line between the church and the world. Forgetting its role, the church becomes civic oriented and is little more than a social organization in the community.

II. MEN ARE TO TAKE THE LEAD IN THE PUBLIC ASSEMBLY

Paul wrote his young associate, Timothy, “These things I write to you, though I hope to come to you shortly; but if I am delayed, I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth” (I Timothy 3:14, 15, NKJV). The epistle of 1 Timothy is really a handbook for preachers, having to do with how the public life of the church should be conducted (as well as other related matters).

In I Timothy, chapter 2, Paul deals with praying and teaching in the church. Having given instructions about praying, he sums it up by saying, “I desire therefore that the men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting” (I Timothy 2:8, NKJV). The word “men” has the Greek word *aner* behind it. *Aner* means a male as a male in contrast with a female. The next verse, I Timothy 2:9, puts the woman in contrast with the male. Men are to take the lead in prayer everywhere, including the public assembly, which women are not to do. Men as men are to do this, to pray, leading out in the public assembly.

Having said, “in like manner,” focusing in on their responsibility in relationship and contrast to the man, Paul gives instructions about the woman’s modest adornment in the assembly (which we will notice in the next point) and the woman not teaching or usurping authority over the man. Paul wrote, “Let a woman learn in silence with all submission. And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence [the reasons for this follow]. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression” (I Timothy 2:11-14). This teaching is further verified in I Corinthians 14:34 when Paul said, “Let your women keep silent in the churches [assemblies], for they are not permitted to speak [teach over men]; but they are to be submissive, as the law also says” (NKJV).

In this day with homosexuals overtly and unashamedly asserting themselves, and with the breaking down of the distinctive roles of male and female in our society, what Paul said is not very popular. Few believe and accept it, let alone practice it. But God has placed the responsibility on man to take the leadership in the public assembly (as well as in the home).

III. MODESTY OF DRESS SHOULD PREVAIL IN THE PUBLIC ASSEMBLY

It is rather interesting after saying that men as men are to take the leadership in praying, Paul writes, “In like manner also, that the women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with propriety and moderation, not with

braided hair or gold or pearls or costly clothing, but, which is proper for women professing godliness, with good works” (I Timothy 2:9, 10, NKJV). Then he continues about women not teaching or having authority over man. Although modest apparel is appropriate everywhere (I Peter 3:1-6), it is especially desirable in the public assembly. There should be no detraction and distraction from true worship and God receiving the glory.

This problem is somewhat dealt with in James chapter 2. Here apparently a non-Christian visitor comes to their assembly. He gets all of the attention, with his gold rings and fancy clothes very much in evidence. The poor are slighted. The chapter starts out by saying, “My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, *the Lord of glory*, with partiality” (NKJV). Notice it calls Christ, “the Lord of glory.” This is in contrast with the dude in the fancy clothes. Christ should be the one getting the attention (he is “the Lord of glory”), and the poor should not be neglected and discriminated against.

And while we are at it, let us add another needed thought. We are living in casual times when men are not dressing up; they are dressing down. This is not all bad, but the assembling of the church should be looked upon as a very special and sacred occasion. How revolting to see people even wearing shorts to church today in some places! Modest apparel is needed any way that you look at it.

IV. “LET ALL THINGS BE DONE FOR EDIFICATION” IN THE PUBLIC ASSEMBLY

Paul wrote in I Corinthians 14:26, “How is it then, brethren? Whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. *Let all things be done for edification*” (NKJV). This section of Scripture involves the exercise of charismatic gifts in the early church. Although these spiritual gifts as such are not available to us today, the principle of what he said here solidly holds true: “Let all things be done for edification.” The words edification, edify, and edifice all carry the same idea—that of building, building up. Of course he is talking about spiritual edification. Everything in connection with the public assembly should be toward that end.

The “pulpit” is no place for carnal levity. Singing, while joyful and jubilant, should really be spiritual, scriptural and conducted in an atmosphere of respect. Non-Christian and professional singing groups do not fit into the context of true spiritual edification. Entertainment and edification are not necessarily the same thing. Then, do the teaching programs and literature used really teach? Or, are they just entertainment and baby sitting devices? Are the activities with the young people just play programs void of emphasis on that which is spiritual with edification being nil for all practical purposes? Are they taught to be any different from the world? Are they different?

Paul wanted edification accomplished in the exercise of their spiritual gifts at Corinth. And the Word of God must be gotten across to really bring about spiritual edification. Paul admonished the Ephesian elders, “So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able

to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified” (Acts 20:32, NKJV). Let us be satisfied with nothing less than true spiritual edification.

V. “LET ALL THINGS BE DONE DECENTLY AND IN ORDER” IN THE PUBLIC ASSEMBLY

That is what Paul said in I Corinthians 14:40, “Let all things be done decently and in order.” This is at the climax of the chapter dealing with the abuse of spiritual gifts. They are given guidelines about people speaking another language and then someone interpreting it. Without an interpreter, they were to keep quiet. They are told about how to pray. The prophets were to speak orderly in sequence by two or three and then sit down. God is a God of order and he wants it in the church. Paul asserts, “For God is not the author of confusion [disorder] but of peace, as in all the churches [assemblies] of the saints” (I Corinthians 14:33).

Today we have a generation brought up on “Rock ‘n’ Roll” music. In many places, they seem to have brought it over into the church. The loud and blustery sounds drown out what Paul has to say here. Elderly saints in the church have been seen to cringe at such irreligious noise. Then certain denominations are characterized by excessive noise making in their worship. One would think that they thought the Lord was hard of hearing. And they all pray aloud (and loud) at the same time. This seems to be in violation and contradiction with what Paul teaches in I Corinthians 14:16. Paul asks, “How will he who occupies the place of the uninformed say ‘Amen’ at your giving of thanks, since he does not understand what you say?” (NKJV). If a man was praying in a language foreign to those who heard it, they could not intelligently say “Amen.” They would not know what the man said. It seems to have been their practice back then for one to lead out in prayer and others to say “Amen” at the end of the prayer. And today how can people say “Amen” at the end of prayer when everyone is praying aloud at the same time? No one can understand what is being said, and it is not “done decently and in order.”

Yes, let everything be done decently and in order by the hymns being selected and the worship being planned out in advance. Let everything be done in a context and an atmosphere of respect. We are approaching the great God of eternity. We come in awe before Him. But at the same time may our worship not degenerate into lifeless formalism and ritualism. As we direct our worship “decently and in order,” let us worship the Lord in spirit and in truth as it comes from our hearts.

Perhaps there are other principles that could be called to your attention involving the public assembly of the church. However, these are enough for us to seriously ponder upon now, with a view to putting them into practice. Yes, there are definite principles that govern the public assembly of the church. And they are what the Lord wants.—*James E. Gibbons*

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