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NOT FOR THE BETTER

by Chip Brogden

"Now in this that I declare unto you I praise you not, that you come together not for the better, but for the worse" (1 Corinthians 11:17).

Jesus made it clear that *"where two or three are gathered together in My Name, there I am in the midst of them"* (Matthew 18:20). Just two or three!

I thank and praise God that Jesus did not say, *"Where two or three **THOUSAND** are gathered together, there I am."* He did not say, *"Where two or three **HUNDRED** are gathered together, there I am."* And He did not say, *"Where two or three **DOZEN** are gathered together, there I am."*

Jesus also did not say **where** the two or three had to be gathered together. He did not specify a *church building* or a living room meeting. And He did not say how many times a week they had to be gathered, or if the gatherings had to be structured or unstructured, open or closed, inside or outside.

By establishing His Presence in the midst of a group so small as two or three, Jesus repudiates our fascination with large numbers. Anyone can gather a crowd if you tell them what they want to hear. May I say that a large group has no more of the presence of Jesus than a small group. The numbers are irrelevant. Either Jesus is in the midst, or He is not. If Jesus is not in the midst of us then having a large group of people will not compensate for Him not being there.

I would rather sit on the living room floor with three people and have Jesus in the midst than sit in a service with three thousand people where Jesus is nowhere to be found.

Of course, Jesus can sometimes be found in large groups of people, but as my wife says, He tends to get lost in the crowd.

WHAT ABOUT ASSEMBLING TOGETHER?

Concerning our assembling together, the author of the letter to the Hebrews says:

"Forsaking not the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as you see the day approaching" (Hebrews 10:25).

Praise the Lord for the simplicity of this Scripture. Once again, we are not told **WHERE** to assemble (the local church). We are not told **WHEN** to assemble (Sunday morning). We are not told **HOW OFTEN** to assemble (three services a week, prayer on Tuesday, youth group on Thursday). Taking this verse by itself, it simply tells us to make the most of every opportunity we have for encouraging one another face-to-face. Yet it gives no direction about where, when, or how many times a week this is to take place.

As a pastor, I misused this verse all the time. I did it in ignorance, but the message I consistently sent out was, *"You need to attend more, pray more, give more, and do more than what you're doing. You need to be submitted to me so you can have a spiritual covering.*

You need to be accountable to a local body of believers. And if you don't come to church every time the doors are open and if you don't participate in every program we have available for you then you are forsaking the assembling of yourselves together!"

Is that really what this verse means? When you read the verses preceding this one it becomes apparent that the Spirit of God is not trying to get us to be more faithful to attend church services! In fact, when this was written, **Christians did not have "church services"** (or church buildings, for that matter).

So what does it mean? If you read the entire chapter (better yet, the entire letter), you find that we are being encouraged to draw near to God without fear, by a *"new and living way,"* through Jesus Christ our High Priest, Who has already assembled us together as the house of God in order to lead us into the Holy of Holies.

Based on what we know about the Lord's Ekklesia, we could just as easily say, "Don't forsake the house of living stones that Jesus is assembling together, because there's no other way to draw near to God!"

But people usually find what they expect to see, not what is really there. So we nullify the Word of God with our tradition, missing the blessing and turning it into a burden.

IN THIS I PRAISE YOU NOT

Jesus said if HE is lifted up then HE will draw all men to HIMSELF. Instead, we lift up religion and draw all men into an institution.

Are we suggesting that Christians should never go to church or have fellowship with others? Of course not. But we ask, can fellowship only occur in the context of a church meeting? Once we realize that our fellowship is supposed to be based on a relationship with Jesus, not a

relationship with "church," we will discover that there are more opportunities for fellowship **OUTSIDE** the local church building than there are **INSIDE**.

That is because Christ-based fellowship lasts as long as you are abiding in Jesus, while church-based fellowship only lasts as long as you are attending that church. When you go to their services and support their agenda then they love you. Once you leave, and they realize you are not coming back, they want nothing more to do with you. The reality is simply this: their fellowship with you is church-based, ministry-based, man-based, or money-based, **but it is not Christ-based**.

The true character of a church, fellowship, or ministry is not judged by how they receive you when you join, or how they treat you when you are there, but rather, how they send you when you go, and how they relate to you after you have left.

Many churches, gatherings, meetings, ministries and fellowships do more harm than good. They should be shut down because Jesus does not have the preeminence there. Thus, they serve no Kingdom purpose. I am convinced that most churches exist only to give the pastor someplace to preach on Sunday.

The meetings continue but no fruit is produced. They are dead branches still clinging to the vine that need to be hacked off to make way for new growth.

Paul told the Corinthians that when they came together it was not for the better, but for the worse. To be sure, they gathered together. They were faithful to assemble. But their gathering together was not a testimony to their faith. It was a testimony to their division. Actually, they were not assembling together at all. They were assembling separately. *"Shall I praise you in this? I do not praise you!"*

The apostle says it would be better for them to stay home than to gather together for the worse, have division, teach heresies, despise the church of God, bring shame to one another, eat and drink damnation to themselves, and come together *"unto condemnation"* (see 1 Corinthians 11:17-34).

This is strong language. When was the last time you heard a message on that? What pastor is willing to stand up and say, "There will be no more services until we can learn how to come together for the better, and not for the worse."

Not many!

IN THE SPIRIT ON THE LORD'S DAY

Brothers and sisters, do not be deceived or troubled. If we are one with the Head then we are one with the Body, even if we are not physically gathered together; and if we are **NOT** one with the Head then we are **NOT** one with the Body, even if we **ARE** physically gathered together. How can that be?

Because Jesus is building His Church, and it is a spiritual house, not a physical house.

This principle is clearly demonstrated in the life of John the apostle. Exiled to the Isle of Patmos because of the testimony of Jesus, he was physically isolated from other believers and had no face-to-face contact with any of the churches.

He had no "covering," no "accountability," no "authority," no "covering," no "accountability," no "authority," no "local body of believers," no "fellowship." He seemed to be cast off into a corner, forgotten.

But John says, "*I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day.*" He maintained connectivity to the Head and to the Body of Christ by way of a spirit-and-truth worship walk. This connectivity is spiritual, not physical, not social, and not geographical. Because of this, John received a clear vision and a fresh revelation of Jesus Christ.

As a side benefit, John knew the exact spiritual condition of the seven churches of Asia, even though he was not assembled together with them.

It is better to be alone and be in the Spirit than to assemble together and be in the flesh, going through the motions of Churchianity, gathering for the worse, and not for the better. Jesus said, "*Isaiah was correct when he prophesied about you hypocrites, saying, 'These people draw near to Me with their mouths, and they honor Me with their lips, but their hearts are far from Me, and they worship Me in vain, for they teach as doctrines the commandments of men'*" (Matthew 15:7-9).

Friends, there is a more excellent way! The Father is actively seeking and recruiting for Himself people who will worship Him in Spirit and in Truth. Jesus is setting them free from vain worship and traditions of men, and He is gathering them together into a spiritual house of living stones. The Holy Spirit is leading them into an ever deepening, ever increasing relationship with Christ.

With them, every day is "*The Lord's Day*"!

While everything not established on Christ is being shaken, those who are being reduced to Christ are receiving a kingdom that cannot be moved. It is a wonderful time to be alive and to see God's Purpose being fulfilled!

Why would we be content with anything less? He has given us new wine and new wineskins. Let us seek the preeminence of Christ in all things, and when Jesus does gather us together in simplicity, He will be in the midst, and our gatherings will be for the better, and not for the worse. Amen.

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