



*Improving  
Our  
Assemblies*

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BOOK  
PUBLICATION**

by Given O. Blakely

# IMPROVING OUR ASSEMBLIES

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## INTRODUCTION

This study has been prompted by my exposure to our Lord's day assemblies. As of 1994, I have reached the Word of God since 1952. Forty of those years have involved ministering regularly in several assemblies. I have been exposed to scores of assemblies in nearly twenty states, so speak from an experiential point of view. While I have witnessed some excellent gatherings, I have found a general deficiency in the public gatherings of the people; particularly those of the Restoration Movement. The average "church service" stands in stark contrast to the plea for the unity of God's people upon the basis of the Word of God and a common identity with Jesus Christ.

The penchant for entertainment that has gripped much of our society appears to have affected the contemporary church. A growing number of our churches are offering a morning of entertainment to the people. A highly professional presentation is submitted in the name of the Lord. But the effects are not lasting--at least that is how it appears. With a professed growing interest in "worship," a marked decline has simultaneously occurred in evening services, both Sunday and Wednesday. The absence of a sustained interest in the things of God reveals that much of what is called "worship" is nothing more than psychological hype. It is time that we do something about this condition.

Some of the areas we will cover are sensitive, but improvement requires that we boldly address them. We have nothing to fear in such a procedure. We have a solemn obligation to "try the spirits, whether they are of God" (1 John 4:1). Further, our examination is a mark of nobility, as seen in the Bereans of old: "These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the Word with all readiness of mind, and searched the Scriptures daily, whether those things were so" (Acts 17:11).

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# FOCUSING THE ASSEMBLY

## Part 2

Heaven's view of the assemblies

Heaven has always honored people that came together to consider the things of God. A wonderful expression of this reality is found in the 133rd Psalm. "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! It is like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron's beard: that went down to the skirts of his garments; as the dew of Hermon, and as the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion: for there the LORD commanded the blessing, even life for evermore" (Psalms 133:1-3).

Observe the progression of this Psalm. First, we are urged to consider with deliberation what is said: "Behold!" Fix your mind upon this, and do not let it waver. It is "good and pleasant" for brothers to dwell together in unity. It is essentially "good"; i.e., it has quality that God recognizes.

Wholesomeness and profit characterize such assemblies. It is also "pleasant;" i.e., refreshing, enjoyable, and satisfying. Rigorous duty does not yield such benefits. Here is a gathering initiated by desire rather than obligation. It contributes to the joy and profit of its participants.

Second, many individuals are united in godly oneness. This is not a caucus for complaining, or a meeting of adversaries. The homogeneity is so real that the people "dwell" together. "Dwelling together" is a Scriptural phrase denoting a godly assembly. The people enjoy each another. They also find delight in the reason for their gathering. The bond of spiritual love fuses them together.

Third, the effects of their gathering are permeating and far reaching. It is like the sanctifying ointment that flowed over Aaron when he was anointed High Priest. Every part of his person was set aside for the work of the Lord. From the top of his head, to his beard, to the lower extremities of his garments, the holy oil flowed. The gathering of the saints is like that.

The "oil of joy" (Isa. 61:3) pervades the assembly of the righteous.

Spiritual advantage and utility are realized as hearts and minds are united in Christ.

Fourth, the blessing of the Lord is there. It is a "commanded" blessing that Satan cannot thwart or neutralize: "for there the LORD commanded the blessing, even life for evermore." God is eminent in the assembly of His people. He is there to bless, giving spiritual advantage. This blessing extends beyond the "worship hour": it is "life forevermore." People are

brought into heaven's realm. This is not an assembly where God is implored to identify with us, but where God blesses us with identity with Himself.

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# THEY THAT FEARED THE LORD

## Part 3

During a usually gloomy time of Israel's history, the people were noted for their departure from God. God was not honored, and the priests "despised" His holy name, even offering "polluted bread" upon His altar. Instead of bringing spotless sacrifices to Him as the Law commanded, they offered "blind," "lame," and "sick" for sacrifice (Mal. 1:6-8). Rather than honoring God's name, they "profaned" it, disgracing Him among the nations (Mal. 1:12). So despised was the name of the Lord that they offered animals killed in the wilds by other beasts, or "torn" in accidental death (1:13). The "whole nation" "robbed" God, and thus were "cursed with a curse" (Mal. 3:8-10). It is difficult to conceive of a condition more displeasing to God. Yet, even during this time--a time of cursing--there was a remnant that thought enough of God to meet together. We are provided a record of their resolve, and God's response to it. "Then they that feared the LORD spake often one to another: and the LORD hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the LORD, and that thought upon his name. And they shall be mine, saith the LORD of hosts, in that day when I make up my jewels; and I will spare them, as a man spareth his own son that serveth him" (Mal. 3:16,17).

First, observe the wickedness of the times constrained this godly remnant to meet together often. They were not lulled into complacency by the times. Neither did they become bitter because of them. The corruption of the era seemed to bring them together rather than drive them apart.

Second, they saw the need of speaking to each other. The subject of their conversation was not the difficulties or hopelessness of the times. Their nation was under the curse of Almighty God, but it did not stop them from the consideration of the good things of God. We are informed they "thought upon His name," constrained by their fear of God.

Third, God took note of their gatherings, listening to their conversations. Because of the wickedness of the times, these were probably secret gatherings. Others did not hear them, but God did.

Fourth, God determined to "spare" them when judgment fell upon their nation. He considered them "jewels" to adorn His crown. He viewed them as "His own son" that served Him. Our assemblies bare much resemblance to those of Malachi's time. We conduct them in the midst of difficult times: times when religion is not noted for its purity. All around us, people are offering to God the residue of their lives instead of the best of them. But we must not be affected by this situation. As we come together to think

upon His name, considering His character and work through Christ, we will gain the attention of heaven. His "book of remembrance" is still being "written," and there is no reason why your assembly cannot be included in it.

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# THERE IS A PURPOSE FOR THE ASSEMBLY

## Part 4

God has a purpose for the assembly of the righteous. For one thing, it is more of a spiritual necessity than a legal requirement. If you gather with fellow believers out of a sense of obligation, you are gathering for the wrong reason. "Forsake not the assembling of yourselves together" (Heb. 10:25) is more an exhortation than a commandment--and there is a difference. A commandment presumes a fundamental tendency to draw back from God. An exhortation postulates a primary inclination to Him. In the first, people are alienated, in the second, they have been reconciled. This is a critical distinction.

In salvation, a transformation takes place that alters the approach to the transformed. This is indicated by a marvelous Pauline expression. When dealing with those living beneath their privileges as the sons of God, he verbalized confidence in their ability to recover and progress. ". . . having confidence in you all . . ." (2 Cor. 2:3). "I rejoice, that in everything I have confidence in you" (2 Cor. 7:16). ". . . because of great confidence in you" (2 Cor. 8:22). "And we have confidence in the Lord concerning you . . ." (2 Thess. 3:4). "Having confidence in your obedience . . ." (Philemon 21). "For I am confident of this very thing, that He Who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ" (Phil. 1:6). When people are "in Christ," this type of confidence is warranted. Now what appears as a harsh commandment becomes a strong appeal to the "new man," resident in every believer.

The assembly is a place where Christ ministers in a special way. "But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: from whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love" (Eph. 4:16). While this ministration is not confined to the assembly, it is concentrated there. Working through the various members of His body, spiritual growth is realized at the personal and collective levels. This is why Jesus is in our gatherings. With this in mind, recall His wonderful promises: "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt. 18:20). It is truly Christ, "the Head" that causes the "joints and bands" of the body to emanate qualities and expressions that minister "nourishment" to the body,

thereby producing growth (Col. 2:19). There is no substitute for this appointed means of nourishment.

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# THE CLIMATE OF OUR ASSEMBLIES

## Part 5

There is a certain climate that must characterize our assemblies. It is something that will require the extensive effort of everyone. Our primary appeal is to the heart--the sensitivity of the people of God. Those enslaved to sin should feel uncomfortable among believers (1 Cor. 14:24-25). They should sense the enormity of their sin and the marvelous attractiveness of the Savior. Those engaged in the good fight of faith should be encouraged and comforted. They should come away convinced that their labor is not in vain in the Lord (1 Cor. 15:58). If this does not happen, our assemblies have only been a mockery, and is a waste of our valuable time.

This cannot be accomplished by simply orchestrating our procedures or rehearsing the activities of the meeting. It is possible to produce an impressive environment in this manner, but it is of no value unless heavenly resources are marshaled and made available to the saints. You must remember that the tabernacle and temple services were precise in procedure. Yet, they could not make the "comers," or worshipers, perfect in their conscience (Heb. 10:1-3). If a God-ordained form could not accomplish what God wanted, you can be sure one contrived by people will be unable to do it.

Properly viewed, the Lord's day is a spiritual eclipse. Heaven should eclipse earth, God overshadow men, Jesus outshine "things," and the contemplation of our heavenly inheritance neutralize the sufferings brought on by our faith. The "Sun of righteous" has risen with "healing in His rays" (Mal. 4:2), and He must be allowed to shine brightly in our gatherings!

### Setting the Tone for the week

Our weekly assemblies set the tone for the rest of the week. They are to take us up to the top of the mountain, where we can survey the promised land. They must furnish us with a reason to live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world. They are to provide incentive to "deny ungodliness and worldly lusts" (Tit. 2:12). Living godly in an unusually godless society is challenging. This necessitates large incentives and strong encouragements. These are to be highlighted in our assemblies: that is the primary purpose for their existence. It is tragic when a Lord's day assembly obscures the very things required to overcome the world. Such things are not necessary, and they are not right. Each assembly must determine it will not allow this to happen. When people inadvertently draw

our attention to things that have no eternal consequence, an effort must be made to redirect our focus. No person or assembly will be able to "lay up" treasures in heaven, if attention is not focused there.

Events within the assembly should move toward the center of the kingdom, as we zealously avoid the tendency to end on the perimeter of spiritual realities. Things with lesser relation to the faith-life should be at the beginning of the assembly, if given a place at all. As things progress, we should move into a greater consciousness of the Lord's presence. If our assemblies do not usher people into the presence of the Almighty, they will contribute to a departure from Him. There is no neutrality in Christ: it is forward or backward, pressing toward the mark or drawing back to perdition (Heb. 10:38-39). A conscious awareness of God's presence includes a cognition of His Person, salvation, and precious promises. When these are dominant in our minds, we are aware of His presence.

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# IS ONE DAY BETTER THEN ANOTHER?

## Part 6

Much controversy exists over the nature of the first day of the week. Some, assuming they have come into a sphere of supposed great spiritual liberty, take it upon themselves to diminish the significance of the first day of the week. The position is based upon Romans 14:5. "One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind. He that regardeth the day, regardeth it unto the Lord; and he that regardeth not the day, to the Lord he doth not regard it. He that eateth, eateth to the Lord, for he giveth God thanks; and he that eateth not, to the Lord he eateth not, and giveth God thanks" (Rom 14:5-6).

First, the word of God does not say that every day is the same--not here, or anywhere else. Divine approval is not given to the position esteeming "every day alike." The point of this passage is that God provides for the conscience of His children, making no allowance for it to be ignored. Believers are encouraged to seek full persuasion concerning their perspective, not allowing it to become a hollow and meaningless position. Somehow, the phrase, "he that regardeth not the day, to the Lord he doth not regard it" is not appealing. It lacks the maturity available in Christ. Throughout Scripture, God placed significant meaning upon epochal days. Israel remembered the day they came out of Egypt, the day the Law was given, and the day they crossed over into Canaan. However, what has happened on the first day of the week causes those events to pale in insignificance by way of comparison.

Jesus was raised from the dead on the first day of the week (Matt. 28:1-2). He appeared to His disciples twice on the first day of the week (John 20:19, 26). Pentecost occurred on the first day of the week, fifty days after the Passover, and ten days after the ascension. These were all matters involving Deity. Candidly, it is difficult for me to say one day is no better than another when Christ so consistently blessed the first day of the week. Every Gospel writer makes a point of relating Christ's resurrection to "the first day of the week" (Matt. 28:1; Mark 16:2; Luke 24:1; John 20:1). It is absurd to conceive of the Spirit speaking in this manner if there were no significance to the day. If it is true that one day is not more significant than another, He would have employed language like "a certain day" (Lk. 5:17; 8:22), or some other generality.

However, this is not a matter of law, and must not be so viewed. Our

associations and involvements with the Living God must be based upon perception and commitment, not obligation. I only bring the matter up in these studies to emphasize the importance of our frame of mind. When we come together, the consideration of Christ's relationship to the first day of the week will affect our use of it. We will appeal to Him to honor us with His presence in a special way, like He did in old time. There is no reason for this day to be like every other day. It can be a mountain top, a spiritual epoch, and a time of unusual blessing.

I have found that those insisting that every day is "the Lord's day" are not generally noted for spiritual productivity and focus every day. In my opinion, our personal makeup requires a time of unmitigated focus to make significant spiritual progress. The first day of the week should be viewed as such a time. In God's kingdom, unusual effort is matched by uncommon blessing. Our Lord will honor those that seek excellent things on the first day of the week. But for those that look at it as "just another day," nothing unusual is likely to happen.

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# DECLARE WAR ON INFORMALITY

## Part 7

What do you mean by "informality?" By "informality," I mean an environment that accents the flesh, not the spirit. Individuals in such an atmosphere are viewed more as friends than brothers and sisters in Christ. The mundane is more easily emphasized in an informal setting, and spiritual focus becomes an interruption. It is easier to speak of the world than of heaven, more natural to complain than bless the Lord, and easier to get caught up in social, political, and domestic issues than eternal things. Spiritually uninformed people are more apt to "speak up" in an informal setting, and confusion can enter without difficulty.

Advantages and Disadvantages Informality has advantages and disadvantages. One of its primary advantages is that it allows for profitable expression. It also can provide an atmosphere where serious inquiry can be made by those seeking the truth. In most of the informal assemblies I have visited, however, these have not been dominating. A casual atmosphere frequently encourages the development of fleshly relationships over spiritual ones. It also appears to greatly inhibit God-consciousness, something that is indispensable in the assembly of the righteous. The formality of focused prayer transfigured Jesus, while an undisciplined outburst from Peter brought a rebuke from God (Matt. 17:1-6).

Although informal assemblies have some apparent advantages, you will find little support for them in the Word of God. This, to say the least, should lead us to question the advisability of assigning superior value to them. Casualness and godliness are not easily joined. It requires an extraordinary amount of spiritual discipline to bring them together. The reason for this condition is clear. Informality tends to give the upper hand to our lower nature. It operates more freely in that type of surrounding. This was one of the besetting sins of the Corinthian assemblies. They lacked orderliness, thus giving rise to interrogations and outbursts that were rebuked (1 Cor. 14:34-35). The gatherings of the righteous are to be characterized by "decency and order" (1 Cor. 14:40).

We encourage the opening of our assemblies with prayer, and the singing of disciplined praise to God. It is also refreshing and beneficial to our spirits to enjoy the reading of Scripture. Entered into properly, these help us to break out of debilitating casualness, making us more alert to God and, consequently, more available for His blessing. These help to direct our minds toward God, where informality becomes a near-absurdity. Note

with care that whenever people were aware of the presence of the Lord, informality tended to disappear. The giving of the Law, the dedication of the tabernacle and temple, and the announcement of Christ's birth are examples (Exodus 19-20; 40: 1 Kings 8; Luke 2).

This is not justification for establishing a purely liturgical religion. Form is not an end of itself. It allows for a disciplined approach to the living God. But if the individual does not personally draw near to God, with the intention of obtaining spiritual benefit, the form has been a thief and a robber, although meticulous and even pleasant to the eye. Candidly, there is a lot of religion these days that parades itself as spiritual liberty, that is nothing more than formalized chaos.

Restating the point

As used in this lesson, "formality" is a focused effort to subdue the lower nature, shutting the door to unprofitable speech and action. It involves marshalling our resources for the glory of God. Our minds are focused, and our hearts are tender. This has a purifying effect upon our speech. I have used the word "informality" to describe a disarming condition, that allows "flesh," or the sinful nature, to enter our assemblies. This is a condition that makes us dull to God and inordinately sensitive to earth and earthly things. When informality is dominate, people tend to act and speak without due consideration of God.

However your assembly can achieve sensitivity to God and the subduing of the Adamic nature, see to it that it is accomplished. I have chosen to call the practical means "formality."

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# SOME THOUGHTS ON FORMALITY

## Part 8

### Examples of Formality

Some very profitable aspects of a godly assembly are related to form. It will be advantageous to review some of them.

The Lord's Supper Here is a form invested with power. No student of the Word of God would encourage informality in this ordinance. The bread, the fruit of the vine, and focused remembrance are all formal, not informal. We are not simply to let our memories wander about in otherwise noble things here. This is not the time to recall how we love our husbands, wives, or children. This is not the time to pray for our nation or seek the conversion of sinners. Our minds must be focused on the Lord Jesus Himself. That is the essence of valid formality--focus! Scripture admonishes us, "Seek those things which are above . . . Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth" (Col. 3:1- 2). I suggest that it is exceedingly difficult to do this without distancing yourself from informality.

Think of the institution of this supper by our blessed Savior. He charged some of His disciples with making the environment "ready" (Mark 14:15; Luke 22:12). Recall how Jesus blessed and broke the bread, also giving thanks for the cup (Luke 24:30ff). He even stooped to wash the disciples feet, much to their consternation (John 13). After the supper, they also sung "a hymn" (Matt. 26:30).

### Public Prayer

Prayer also falls into this category. An ordered approach to public prayer is encouraged. Prayers are to be focused on "all men," in distinction to purely selfish motives (1 Tim. 2:1). Those that hear the prayer are to be able to say "Amen at the giving of thanks" (1 Cor. 14:16). Prayer is itself a form--a container in which thought and contemplation are presented to God.

When our blessed Lord taught us to pray, He provided a form for us. It was not a rigid form, but it was nevertheless a form, or outline (Matt. 6:9-13). He furnished areas on which we are to place emphasis. Never is such an approach more relevant than in the assembly.

### Preaching

Preaching is attended with a degree of formality. Words are to be edifying (1 Cor. 14:26; Eph. 4:29), which requires discipline and focus. The Word itself is to be the substance of the presentation (2 Tim. 4:2). Things that generate questions are to be avoided (1 Tim. 1:4). Informed and gifted

hearers are to examine what is said (1 Cor. 14:29; 1 Cor. 10:15), finding if it is from God.

The point to be seen in all of this is that informality allows more into our assemblies than we want: things that are inhibiting and distracting. A good degree of honesty will confirm this to you.

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# THE CONDUCT OF OUR CHILDREN

## Part 9

As a matter of observation, I have been in assemblies where the young children considered the building to be a play area or gymnasium. I have seen them running through auditoriums and classrooms having the time of their life. Elderly people have lost their grip on canes supporting them, and chairs and stands have toppled in their path as they ran gleefully through the area set aside for worship and teaching. Everything from shrieks of glee to childish cries of selfishness and pain fill the air, all forming a gigantic distraction to everyone present. It is not surprising that a child would think this way: after all, they are children. It is startling, however, that anyone would think such conduct had no effect upon "true worshipers."

Can you imagine the children of your assembly at Mount Sinai? God told Moses to tell the people to see to it that no one touched the holy mount. Whoever did would surely put to death (Ex. 19:11-13). I realize our assemblies are not a duplication of Sinai. They involve something infinitely more blessed! But our children will not get the blessing while unrestrained and undisciplined.

All of this is not as innocent as it may appear. We give no spiritual advantage to the children by allowing them freedom to romp and play in our meetings.. You can imagine the effect this would have on a classroom in a medical school . . . or a library . . . or during a class on administering CPR. Matters related to the weekly assembly are infinitely more important than those things.

"Little ones" were not excluded from the ancient assemblies. Even heathen Pharaoh knew these things. When he finally consented to letting Israel go, these were his words: "Go ye, serve the LORD; only let your flocks and your herds be stayed: let your little ones also go with you" (Exodus 10:24). When the Moabites and Ammonites came against God's people, Judah gathered together to seek help from the Lord. They included the "little ones" in their gathering. As it is written, "And all Judah stood before the LORD, with their little ones, their wives, and their children" (2 Chronicles 20:13). When the Lord Jesus was among us, some "brought unto him little children, that he should put his hands on them, and pray . . ." (Matthew 19:13). I have been in some assemblies where the children could not have been still long enough for Jesus to put His hands on them and pray! I cannot conceive of their parents allowing in Jesus' fleshly presence what

they allow in His spiritual presence. After all, when we are gathered in His name, He is there among us (Matt. 18:20).

It goes without saying that our homes are to be noted for a godly emphasis. This is the point of the admonition, "fathers, provoke not your children to wrath; but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord" (Eph. 6:4). This speaks more of environment than of routine. Suffice it to say, the assembly of the saints should not be a glaring contradiction to our daily manner of life.

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# WATCH OUT FOR THE DEVIL!

## Part 10

Our adversary, the devil, uses both formality and informality. He can placate an insensitive conscience with either one, causing people to think they can rest in surroundings rather than in God. The punctilious form that characterized the Israelites religious feasts would please the liturgist; but it did not please God. Entering into those heartless observances, Satan led them into vain practices. They honored God with their lips, but their hearts were far from Him (Matt. 15:8; Mk. 7:6). On the other hand, the failure of the Israelites to remember they were in God's presence led to the ultimate informality. It is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play" (1 Cor. 10:7).

When you weigh both environs, you will find the burden of Scripture is on the side of formality. The solemn obligation laid upon the people of God is, "Let all things be done decently and in order" (1 Cor. 14:40). "Let all things be done unto edifying" (1 Cor. 14:26). Ad hoc contributions in the assembly generally do not lead in this direction. Our fleshly natures tend to erupt whenever given opportunity.

Close the door to the devil in your assembly. This is done by fine tuning your spiritual vision. Sing, speak, and pray with your hearts and minds set on heavenly things. Put Jesus Christ at the heart of everything. Relate all of your activities to Him. You will have to work at this, but God will give you the strength to accomplish it. Satan is not able to work in an environment saturated with spirituality. He moves freely and without restraint in one that is not. Energetically seek the favor of God in your gatherings by centering on His salvation!

Hearts and minds can degenerate

Without discipline and focus, our minds and hearts tend to degenerate. The reason for this is quite simple. We are in a war zone, under assault by the enemy of God and the adversary of our souls. If our minds are not focused, many opportunities will arise for distraction. They will range from the innocent expressions of the young to outbursts of pride among those mature in years.

There are two sides to every person in Christ: the "old" and the "new" (Eph. 4:23-24), the "flesh" and the "spirit" (Gal. 5:17; Rom. 7:22-25).

When the "old," or Adamic, part of us dominates, we become incapable of receiving or perceiving spiritual things: i.e., they do not make sense to us.

"This present evil world" (Gal. 1:4) will actually have more appeal to us

than "the world to come" (Mark 10:30; Heb. 2:5). It is not possible to realize spiritual gain in such a frame of mind. It makes little difference if fine songs are sung and great sermons preached. If we are not centered upon the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, we will not be helped to heaven or made more godly.

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# SWITCHING GEARS

## Part 11

Somehow people think that when the formalities start, everyone will be able to instantly switch to a kind of spiritual gear--something like turning on a light switch. It is remarkable how this notion has permeated our assemblies. But this is not at all possible, and anyone that supposes it is, seriously lacks perception. There is such a stark contrast between flesh and Spirit, that a transition between the two cannot easily occur. Flesh stifles the Spirit, and the Spirit suppresses the flesh. They cannot have dominance simultaneously, and are in unrelenting opposition to one another. Anyone imagining you can leap-frog between the two is simply wrong, and critically so!

Candidly, I am alarmed at the number of people that think they can speak together of everything from sports to politics, quickly shifting into a spiritual gear at the sound of a note of "worship music," or an arresting summons from the "worship leader." Such rapid transitions are not possible, and those that suppose they have accomplished such a feat only deceive themselves.

Israel was commanded by God to prepare to meet Him at Sinai. They had to wash their clothes, preparing for the "third day" when God would meet with them. Husbands even had to refrain from intimacies with their wives (Ex. 19:10-14). I am not for one moment suggesting that regimented procedures should be imposed on the people for preparing for the Lord's day. I am saying that what happened at Sinai confirms that you cannot quickly come into God's presence, unprepared and overcome with the cares of this life. It is time for sobriety and spiritual alertness when we approach God!

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# WHAT ABOUT CASUAL DRESS?

## Part 12

There is also an alarming tendency toward casual dress in the assembly. This is especially true during Lord's day evening services. This is not a point of condemnation, nor is that my intent. However, it is, in my judgment, a practice that can be more disarming than one thinks. Most individuals would not think of participating in a wedding or funeral in casual attire. If one supposes that what the individual wears is of no consequence to God, there are some things to be considered. Women, for instance, are admonished to wear "modest apparel," avoiding extravagant attire in the assembly (1 Tim. 2:9). The reason for this prohibition is not that such a procedure is illegal. It is simply that nothing is to be permitted that detracts from God or attracts to the individual.

Think of the high priest under the law. What he wore was very important. He was directed to wear "linen breeches" so that when he ascended the slope leading to the altar his naked thighs would not show. "And thou shalt make them linen breeches to cover their nakedness; from the loins even unto the thighs they shall reach" (Exodus 28:42).

God is interested in what our people wear--He says that this is the case! In speaking of assembly attire, the Spirit says, "In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with braided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array; but (which becometh women professing godliness) with good works" (1 Tim. 2:9-10). The subject of the second chapter of first Timothy is the public assembly. The objective of this text is not to outline the precise clothing that is to be worn, but the manner in which we are clothed. "Modest apparel" is clothing that does not draw undue attention to the individual; clothing that is appropriate to wear in the presence of the Lord. The Spirit does not allow us the luxury of forgetting God when we dress.

My purpose is not to outline what is or is not proper attire. It is imperative, however, that the people themselves give thought to this matter. Our gatherings are certainly not to degenerate into a showcase for the latest clothing styles. Neither are we to suppose that God is unconcerned about our appearance. We are coming before God, let us conduct ourselves appropriately. If God did not want to see the "nakedness" of the high priest, you can rest assured He does not want to see ours either. After all, He has not changed, even if people have.

A personal note is in order at this point. Having raised ten children, I have

given considerable thought to the development of a godly conscience in them. We have consistently taught our children that God is deserving of only the best. You never give your second best to the Lord. You give Him the best of your person and resources. Casualness before Him is always out of order. All of your resources should be marshaled and kept in control when you stand before God. My suggestion is that informality does not contribute to this process. We have taught our children to apply this to the clothing that they wear to the assembly, and to the offerings they give, as well as their mental alertness. Saturday night is not the time to stay up late indulging in pleasures and other interests unrelated to our salvation. We should not be offering lame lambs of thought and appearance to our Savior.

Having said all of this, dictating the manner of dress for the assembly is not in harmony with the new covenant. Change for the good, or spiritual improvement, must always be the result of growth in Christ. To put it another way, people must have a reason to change. An awareness of the purpose for gathering, with a sense of the presence of the Lord and a desire to please Him, will provide a basis for each member to do their best for the Lord--even in dress.

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# COMMON MYTHS CONCERNING OUR GATHERINGS

## Part 13

There are a lot of myths that have arisen concerning the assembly. These have neutralized the effectiveness of the assembly, focusing on human objectives rather than Divine ones. A review of these will be helpful. The purpose of this review is not to deprecate the subjects discussed, or to reduce their role in the perfecting of the saints. They must not, however, be allowed to become the focus of the assembly--the overriding reason for the saints coming together.

### Myth #1 - Evangelistic thrust

Many assemblies focus on reaching the lost during their gatherings. Their Lord's day meetings are evangelistic rallies. This is a noble desire, but has no support in Scripture. While this is a very cherished tradition, there are some things that it has overlooked. First, the conversion of souls is not the primary purpose of God; it is the initial means to the realization of that purpose. God's objective is to walk with and in men (2 Cor. 6:16-17). He calls us "into the fellowship of His dear Son" (1 Cor. 1:9). Conversion is the vestibule to that experience, not the heart of it.

If people do not advance in the faith, they will draw back to perdition. That is the express teaching of Scripture. "Therefore, leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection; not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God, of the doctrine of baptisms, and of laying on of hands, and of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment. And this will we do, if God permit. For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, if they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame" (Heb. 6:1-6). "Now the just shall live by faith: but if any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him. But we are not of them who draw back unto perdition; but of them that believe to the saving of the soul" (Heb. 10:38-39).

The clear teaching of the Word of God is that we are in a spiritual environment that forbids neutrality or lack of progress. It is not possible to "lay hold of eternal life" in a state of uninvolvedness. Those that are not progressing are digressing, and there are no exceptions--none at all!

Further, the individual that is actually drawing back is not in the good pleasure of God. It is not possible for such a person to be saved. That would postulate God saving people in whom He found no pleasure. This is an absurdity and a flagrant denial of the very principle of salvation. The assembly bears directly upon these things. This is a time when the body comes together to derive the spiritual strength and nourishment required to successfully complete the race that is set before them. By express revelation, everything in the assembly is to contribute to the building up of the saints: "Let all things be done unto edifying" (1 Cor. 14:26). This eliminates showcase religion, and also that which focuses on the evangelization of the lost. The assembly must focus on the strengthening of those in quest of heaven. This will allow for an appeal to sinners within a proper framework. Evangelization serves no purpose at all if those that respond do not end in heaven. Glorification is the predetermined outcome of justification (Rom. 8:29-30). The assembly is one of the appointed means to the realization of that purpose. From time to time, I will hear zealous preachers upbraid the church for not considering the lost more. "With people going to hell out there," they reason, "we cannot be all caught up with the purity of the church," etc. Statements like this reveal a very infantile view of the kingdom of God. The entire emphasis of Apostolic doctrine is the church. All of the epistles are written to the church. All of the gifts have been given to the church. This is the appointed vehicle for doing all of the work under the administration of the Lord Jesus Christ. When the lost are won, this is where they come--to the church. This is where their souls will be nourished, if, indeed, they are at all. A church in sound spiritual health is the ONLY way the world will ever be effectively reached for Christ.

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# **Myth #2 - THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS**

## **Part 14**

Too many "churches" are nothing more than community clubs. People come to hear announcements and/or reports of those in their group. The bearing that these reports have upon eternity or identity with the Living God is really incidental, and of no real consequence. The primary objective is the community report. More audience participation occurs at this time than at any other time. If a leader asks for testimonies of praise to God, a wave of silence sweeps across the audience. If requests for pray are solicited, detailed reports are given of those that are ill within that assembly. A call for announcements, however, is sure to activate a lot of otherwise unmovable people.

Candidly, it is not possible to support this approach to our assemblies with the Word of God. The primary news in the assembly is the Gospel, not updates on the affairs of the community.

This is not intended to be a condemnation of these activities. Rather, we are to see them as an area of vulnerability. They allow for distraction, opening the door of our hearts for the entrance of things that diminish the glory of Christ. This is not something over which disruption should be caused. It is, however, an area in which we must become sensitive. If we want our services to yield the great benefit, there must be a reduction of every distracting element, and a corresponding increase in our focus on things eternal.

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# Myth #3 - TO AFFECT POLITICAL CHANGE

## Part 15

It has become fashionable for political presentations to be made in the churches of the land. Strong appeals are made to religious people during political campaigns to change their focus to the correction of the ills of the nation. All of this sounds good, but is it really good?

First, it is in order to offer public prayers for "kings, and all that are in authority." The purpose of these petitions is not, however, to address particular difficulties characterizing a certain time. Rather, it is to ensure that believers "may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty" (1 Tim. 2:2). National turbulence and anarchy are disruptive to the community of believers, requiring more of a defensive posture.

However, there is a lot of difference between praying for those in authority and investing assembly time in political issues.

Can you image Paul writing Rome, Corinth, or one of the other assemblies, about social activism? Is there a single word in any Epistle that focuses on a social issue of the day? Surely they did have grave social issues, just as surely as we. Yet, this was never the focus of Apostolic instruction. This hardly indicates that we should avoid involvement in community and national interests. It does mean that this is not to be allowed a place of dominance in our assemblies.

History will confirm that religious bodies that have made social or political change their focus have invariably degenerated. Modernism, the attempt to conform revelation to this world, will ultimately dominate when this emphasis prevails. As a result, the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, eternal glory, and holiness, assume a subordinate role. Any procedure or emphasis that tends to degenerate cannot be proper, and should be intently avoided. We are being changed by the Spirit of God "from glory to glory" (2 Cor. 3:18). Anything in our assemblies that does not contribute to this process, is potentially damaging.

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# Myth #4 - TO COLLECTIVELY WORSHIP GOD

## Part 16

A lot of things have been said about coming together to worship God. The latest craze of chorus singing presumes this to be the fundamental reason why saints come together, although there is not a syllable in all of Scripture affirming such to be the case. I know it is like attacking motherhood to question this postulate, but we will do it anyway. We are admonished to "try the spirits," and test them we must. All of this seems to underscore the glaring absence of worship in the hearts of such people during the week. There really is no support for this contention in Scripture. Those in Christ occupy a unique position. It is said of them, "We are the circumcision which worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh" (Phil. 3:3). This is not how the people of God OUGHT to be, this is how they are! You can no more keep a worshiper from worshipping than you can keep a singer from singing. Jesus spoke of a time when "true worshipers" would become dominant. "But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth" (John 4:23- 24). Here, worship is not an objective, but a result. Our Lord was speaking of the "day of salvation" (2 Cor. 6:2), when the hearts of men would be changed. We are living in that time! Those in Christ are the "true worshipers." In fact, they are the exclusive worshipers! They do not worship because they have to, or because they have been commanded to do so. They are "the circumcision, which worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh" (Phil. 3:3). When they come together, they worship; but that is not WHY they come together. Believers are nowhere portrayed as coming together to worship. Rather, they come together BECAUSE they are worshipers. The saints of God come together to edify one another and provoke one another to love and good works. The good fight of faith depletes our spiritual resources, requiring a refurbishing or our strength. Everything that is done in the assembly is to be edifying. Even the prayers are to be so spoken as to result in an "Amen" in those that hear them (1 Cor. 14:16). Singing is to result in teaching and admonishment (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16).

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# LORD'S TABLE MEDITATION

## Part 17

One of the primary things for which our churches are noted is the Lord's Table. Every Lord's day congregations around the world meet together to break bread and drink the fruit of the vine. It is a noble activity, supported and encouraged by the Word of God. Here we commune with the body and blood of our Lord (1 Cor. 10:16). We also proclaim the Lord's until He come (1 Cor. 11:26). Personal dedication takes place at this table, because we cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of devils (1 Cor. 10:21). In spite of these things, our churches are not known for clear and forthright teachings and meditations around the Lord's table. My experience has confirmed that, as a rule, we have some very unacceptable presentations at this time. Often nothing at all is said, and people that are visiting do not even know what is happening. Although most of our churches are not advocates of "closed communion," that is, for all practical purposes, what we practice. Too often, prayers said at the table cannot be heard by the audience, and those that can be heard are frequently not worth hearing. The Table is an excellent time to proclaim the death of our Lord. This is an activity of remembrance, and our memories of Jesus are to be stirred and challenged. Nothing should be said at this time that makes it difficult to recall our blessed Lord. Certainly nothing should be said that makes it difficult to think upon our Lord's death in our behalf. I have often had to overcome things said at the Lord's table to think upon Christ. This is not the place for a discourse on the beauty of nature, a challenge for the church to win souls, or an exhortation to have good families. These are all good things, but they are out of order at the Lord's table.

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# PREACHING

## Part 18

Preaching is a vital part of our gatherings. Here is where the mind of God is proclaimed, and where our faith can grow. Faith does come by hearing the "Word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17). If that word is not heard, it is not likely that faith will come-- and that is stating the case mildly.

Every congregation should be demanding when it comes to preaching.

When a person stands in the pulpit, they are to be speaking "as the oracle of God" (1 Pet. 4:10-11). If what is said conflicts with what God has said, it is out of order, no matter who says it. The solemn injunction of the Spirit is, "Preach the Word . . ." (1 Tim. 4:1). Jesus said, "Preach the Gospel . . ." (Mark 16:16). Paul said, "we preach not ourselves" (2 Cor. 4:5). Insist that these admonitions are fulfilled regularly and with excellence by your preacher.

Unfortunately, there is much unprofitable talk coming from the pulpits of the land, and it ought not be so. Israel was rebuked for allowing unapproved words to be spoken to them. "The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests bear rule by their means; and my people love to have it so . . ." (Jer. 5:31). "For they prophesy falsely to you in My name: I have not sent them, saith the Lord" (Jer. 29:9). It is tragic when such things occur--tragic because God's name is dishonored and His people are plundered. In God's kingdom, if you are not given spiritual resources by those speaking in the name of the Lord, your heart is robbed. We do not meet in a spiritual vacuum, and we do well to be demanding about the quantity and quality of spiritual food we receive.

For spiritual growth to take place, you must be challenged to think about the things of God. Preaching is to challenge your thinking. This is not an activity to be characterized by humorous anecdotes and juvenile illustrations. Preaching is to reflect the mind of God. It is to contain the Word of God. Good preaching will remind you of what you read in the Bible, and Bible reading will remind you of good preaching. If this does not occur, the door of hearts and minds is left ajar for Satan, and he will not fail to enter in! In our day, preaching has lost its dominance, being replaced by other emphases. But God has not changed His mind, and believers must not change theirs. "It pleased God through the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe" (1 Cor. 1:21). This is not limited to reaching the lost. It was, after all, spoken to the church! It is also "saved" by the preaching of the Gospel. As it is written, "Moreover, brethren, I

declare unto YOU the Gospel . . . which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand; by which also ye ARE saved, if ye keep in memory what I have preached unto you . . . " (1 Cor. 15:1-2). If preaching does not help us remember Christ, it will cause us to forget Him. We are, after all, in a "present evil world" that militates against our faith (Gal. 1:4).

Several objectives are served by preaching. All of them are noble all of them are not equal. First, preaching is to set Christ at the center; He is the sum and substance of the Gospel that we bring (Acts 8:5, 25; 17:18; 1 Cor. 1:23; 2 Cor. 1:19). Second, the glorious promises of God are to be set before us. They will draw us into involvement with God, for that is what they are calculated to do (2 Cor. 1:20; Heb. 6:12; 11:33; 2 Pet. 1:4). Third, those that are fighting the good fight of faith are to be encouraged, comforted, and made glad with the prospect of coming deliverance (Acts 16:40; Rom. 1:12; 1 Thess. 2:11). Fourth, the people are to be challenged to crucify the flesh, making no provision for the fulfillment of its lust (Rom. 8:5-12; Gal. 5:24; Col. 3:5). Fifth, unbelief is to be confronted and rebuked (Heb. 3:12,19; 4:6,11). There is no place for it in the kingdom of God. Sixth, the correction of spiritual disorders is to be accomplished through skillful use of the Word of God (2 Tim. 3:16; 4:2). Thus is not an exhaustive view of the objectives of preaching, but it covers the primary areas.

I have listed these things in the order of their priority, as I see them. I have found by experience, majoring on the primary things reduces the necessity for having to deal with the minor ones. It is very rare that persistent difficulties are found among those hearing and receiving Christ-centered preaching. It is the preachers responsibility to preach, and the hearers responsibility to hear. Wherever moral failure occurs in the church, one, and possibly both, of these have been missing.

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# PRAYERS

## Part 19

Prayers are a crucial part of the assembly. Here we call upon the name of the Lord. We ask for blessing, seek forgiveness, and intercede for our brothers and sisters. In the assembly prayers are not personal. "We," not "I," is the dominant personal reference. The individual that leads in prayer is bringing the congregation before the throne of all grace. Collective interests are to be the primary ones. If individual concerns are made known, they should be the kind that require collective faith and prayer. Prayers are addressed to God, but they are also for the benefit of the people. If they cannot be heard by the audience, they should not be uttered in their behalf. I have been in some assemblies where it was not possible to discern when certain prayers commenced, or when they ended. This is something that is not to be tolerated. We must target the whole congregation being able to say "Amen, at the giving of thanks."

Scripture addresses the matter of public prayer, providing insight into the mind of the Lord on the matter. "I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; for kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior; Who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth. I will therefore that men pray every where, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting . . . In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with braided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array; but (which becometh women professing godliness) with good works" (1 Timothy 2:1-4, 8-9).

First, public prayer is broad in perspective: "supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks." While there is diversity here, there is also focus. Supplications are earnest pleas. They are attended with by the element of urgency. Prayers are expressions of reliance upon God, including articulations of worship and adoration. Intercessions involving standing in the gap for other individuals, exercising our role as "kings and priests" unto God. The "giving of thanks" is a broad category that ranges from insightful thanksgiving for salvation to expressions of gratefulness for contemporary deliverance and strength.

These require us to view life from the heavenly perspective. We perceive life as an arena in which God works in response to our prayers. We will

have to exercise diligence to maintain this perspective, but it can be done.

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# SINGING

## Part 20

Singing is a wonderful outlet for faith and joy. On a personal level, James wrote, "Is any merry? let him sing psalms" (James 5:13). This is also true collectively basis, and becomes the source of great encouragement when done for the glory of God.

It is unfortunate that our churches are not noted for their singing. They bear much resemblance to the Israelites that hung their harps on the willow trees, refusing to sing during the Babylonian captivity (Psa 137:2). I have been in countless congregations where a single hearty voice could drown out the entire congregation. This condition dishonors our blessed Lord, and must not be tolerated.

Song services characterized by excellence Under the Law, a shadow of good things to come (Heb. 8:5; 10:1), God related singing to the service of Himself. Singers were appointed, with an elaborate array of instruments and cymbals (; 1 Kings 10:12; 1 Chron. 15:16-27). Once, when the ark of the covenant was restored to the temple of God, the singers and trumpeters joined in harmonious praise to God. Scripture tells us that they made "one sound to be heard in praising and thanking the Lord." At that sound a remarkable thing happened. "The house was filled with a cloud, even the house of the Lord . . . for the glory of the Lord had filled the house of the Lord" (2 Chron. 5:13- 14). It is a noble objective, indeed, which determines to provide an environment in which God is pleased to dwell. Our song service can be such a atmosphere!

Things that detract from singing heartily and with insight should not dominate the song service. We live in a time when it is necessary to elaborate on this point. In many of our congregations, the people are losing the ability to sing skillfully. The introduction of choruses has brought many good things to our assemblies. For one thing, they have brought the singing of Scripture back into the assembly. This is good, and cannot be minimized. There are, however, other considerations that decidedly neutralize this benefit.

Singing with projections of words, the people rarely, if ever, see notes. Unless unusually gifted, those that would normally sing harmony no longer do so. I realize we are not to encourage theatrics in the assembly of the righteous, and deplore such tactics. However, neither should mediocrity be encouraged, that scourge that leads to lukewarmness. I have been in assemblies where eight or ten choruses/songs were sung, and few,

if any, of them were known. An outstanding and gifted song leader might enable some progress by leading the chorus five or six times. Yet, it is exceedingly difficult to worship God by singing songs and choruses you do not know. The heart is greatly restricted when one cannot fully sing "with the understanding." The majority of the songs should be familiar enough to the assembly for them to be taken into the hearts and mind. Thus the congregation can sing "heartily, as to the Lord" (Col. 3:16,23). Those that insist on leading us through one new song after another accomplish little for God, because they offer little for the heart. Our song services are not to be learning exercises, but an occasion for praising, teaching, and admonishing one another (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16). Having said this, learn new songs and choruses that meet God's objectives. Strive to expand your song repertoire without hindering the ability of the congregation to express themselves freely. The church has a rich musical heritage. Be challenged to capitalize on that heritage to the glory of God and the edification of the church.

Our songs must contain the truth of God. It is no more right to sing a lie than it is to preach one. Juvenility in singing can no more be justified than childish preaching. Approved singing is the result of the Word of Christ dwelling in us "richly" (Col. 3:16a). You must work at keeping the "flesh" out of your song services. It is fashionable these days to simply "have fun" when singing. This has no basis in God's Word, and, candidly, contradicts much of what is proclaimed there. Joying in God and "having fun" are not synonymous. Spiritual joy springs more from the heart, affecting the whole person. "Fun" is purely external, and cannot reach the heart, because "the flesh profiteth nothing" (John 6:63).

Your song service should prepare people to hear the Word of the Lord. It is not an end of itself, but a means to the end. The song leader should present the people to the minister of the Word with clear minds and eager hearts. Christ and heaven should be dominant in their thinking, thus making them fertile soil.

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# MAKING ANNOUNCEMENTS

## Part 21

The reproach of too many meetings is the making of announcements. Let it be clear that the gathering of the saints is not a time for the community bulletin board, as sacred as it may appear. Making announcements is particularly absurd when it consists of reading things that are already written in the traditional bulletin. The vast majority of announcements that I have heard have had very little to do with the work of the Lord. Too often this time consists of an update on everyone that is ill, with extensive apologies for not being aware of how additional people were "under the weather." I am not sure where all of this originated, but I am sure it was not prompted by a word from Scripture.

If the purpose of the assembly is to give us an advantage in the good fight of faith, why is so much time spent speaking of things that actually detract from that accomplishment? In my judgment announcements should be made that alert people to divine commitments. What about announcing, "God is our Refuge and Strength, a very present help in the time of trouble" (Psa. 46:1). Announcements should be made that are harmonious with the reason for our gathering. Everything not immediately related to the faith-life should be held in abeyance.

If we leave our assemblies thinking of the announcements that have been made, we have been disarmed. This is not the time or the place to be brought up to date on the activities and plights of our friends. Spirit, not flesh, is to dominate our assemblies. Jesus said, "the flesh profiteth nothing" (John 6:63).

A period given to extensive announcements opens the door for more evil than good. I have often observed that people noted for remarkable silence during a discussion of the things of the kingdom become a veritable warehouse of information at announcement time.

Recently, I have noticed a period of time allotted to announcements at the conclusion of the service. I realize that people are well meaning, but they are not wise. Believers should leave the assembly with the Word of God on their mind, burning in their hearts. But, alas, this is not so when we close with multitudinous announcements. Here we leave with an acute awareness of earthly activities, the problems of fellow members, and the incidental schedule of events for the coming week. This effectively neutralizes the power of God's Word, diverting the attention of the people to matters of lesser consequence. So, while the godly minister has labored

to rise above the mundane, the services close with us being dragged down into that realm again. Such results should be taken more seriously. They are hindrances to the people, although they were given in professed consideration of them.

Announcements can be posted on the bulletin board. Those that are not interested enough to read them, do not need to hear them. I understand that we stand the risk of offending some "well meaning" people. But if they are offended by the exclusion of earthly things in favor of a heavenly focus, they are not "well meaning." On the other hand, a misplaced focus will incur the disfavor of God. If faced with a decision on these things, our assemblies must decide whose favor they prefer.

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# THE SUNDAY SCHOOL

## Part 22

When I was a boy, a lot of people that came to Sunday School did not attend what was called "the worship service." Today, there is a trend in the other direction. The main services seem to have more people. This may appear to be favorable from the preacher's point of view: but what about the Sunday School teacher's perspective?

The purpose for classes is focused and tailored instruction in the ways of the Lord. Particular attention should be given to the foundations of the faith. Our people are not grounded, and there is no acceptable excuse for this condition. Almost inadvertently, we have produced a body of people that lack spiritual roots. One of the results is the prolific increase of counselors and "how-to" seminars. There is an increased requirement for these things because people are not able to cope with life. Our failure to ground them in the faith has made them vulnerable to the artifices of the devil.

Believers will not be able to "stand against the wiles of the devil" (Eph. 6:10ff) if they are not established in the faith. And, if they cannot stand, they will fall! It makes little difference what may appear to have been accomplished in people if they cannot stand in the "day of adversity!" Solomon wisely said, "If thou faint in the day of adversity, thy strength is small" (Proverbs 24:10). Jeremiah provides a telling observation in this regard: "If thou hast run with the footmen, and they have wearied thee, then how canst thou contend with horses? and if in the land of peace, wherein thou trustedst, they wearied thee, then how wilt thou do in the swelling of Jordan?" (Jeremiah 12:5). The idea is this: if the ordinary difficulties of life disorient you, what will happen when severe trials come to you? The remarkable rise of immorality and erratic behavior in the church tells us that people are not able to contend with the unusual. Further, believers are to "grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 3:18). No alternative to spiritual growth is provided by our Lord--not if you expect to survive the attacks of the evil one and master your own weaknesses. Growth is necessary for survival. You simply cannot remain in spiritual infancy and stand under the assaults of the "prince of the power of the air" (Eph. 2:1-2\_! Our Lord declared that those hearing and receiving the Word, yet lacking root in themselves, were unable to endure the heat of the day. His telling remark is this: "And have no root in themselves, and so endure but for a time: afterward, when

affliction or persecution ariseth for the word's sake, immediately they are offended" (Mark 4:17).

All of this does have a bearing on the Sunday School. Here is where instruction in the manner and requirements of the kingdom takes place in a unique way. Your classes should be tailored for your constituency. If you are a young congregation, with most of your people being new in Christ, your curriculum should be structured to ground the people. It is not enough to simply roam through the Bible, dealing with generalities. Target making your people strong believers that can stand against the wiles of the devil.

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# THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE FAITH

## Part 23

The foundations, or principles, of the faith are requisites in the faith-life. The fall of the human race, the reason for and ministry of the Law, and the role of Scripture, should be understood by believers. They should not be confused by subjects like the resurrection of the dead, the second appearing of Christ, and the judgment of the world. Too many of our people are ungrounded in the faith and uncertain about their salvation. Understand God A failure to understand God alienates the individual from the Lord. This is the clear teaching of Scripture. "Having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart" (Eph. 4:18). This is a remarkable statement! If an ignorance of God alienates people from Him, we are faced with a contemporary church that is largely estranged from the very One Whose name it bears. The tragedy of such a circumstance cannot be overstated!

One of the hallmarks of the new covenant is the knowledge of God: i.e., the intimate knowledge of or acquaintance with God. "And they shall not teach every man his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: for all shall know me, from the least to the greatest" (Heb. 8:11). In my judgment, the church has never capitalized on this aspect of the covenant. It has been content to remain unfamiliar with God Himself, depending upon self-proclaimed experts to handle that aspect of religion. This is not an acceptable situation!

The revealed way to know God is through His Word. He has "magnified" His Word "above all His name" (Psa. 138:2). Above every Divine attribute or quality, God's Word is predominant! The reason for this is obvious: if we cannot trust what God says, nothing else really matters! Further, an understanding of God must come through our rational processes, not soulful feelings. The Word addresses this part of us.

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# COMPREHENDING SALVATION

## Part 24

If salvation does not make sense to people, they will not avail themselves of it. When people "neglect" the "great salvation" provided in Christ Jesus, their attention has been diverted to lesser things. Salvation is the thrust of Apostolic doctrine. It encompasses everything involved in the orientation of mankind for glory. Beginning with the remission of sin, it includes separation from the course of this world, fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ, and the setting of our affection on things above, not on things on the earth (1 Pet 2:11; 1 Cor 1:9; Col 3:1-2)The Sunday school must help people regain their focus, while turning away from things that are temporal. It is not enough to merely have an academic acquaintance with the Word of God.

We are living in "the day of salvation" (2 Cor. 6:2): a day when the door of heaven has been opened to humanity. Jesus has sanctified, or set apart, a way to God, and He has done so for the redeemed (Heb 10:20). This is the way of which Isaiah prophesied--a way raised up in the desert for those separated from the world (Isa 35:8). If our people do not have an intelligent grasp of that way, they will not end up with the Lord. Our Sunday Schools must be devoted to making the day of salvation more clear to those being taught.

The forgiveness of sins is available to all, with righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom. 15:13). Our classes must help people understand and appreciate this marvelous availability.

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# COMPREHENDING THE WORD OF GOD

## Part 25

Isaiah spoke of a time when the Word of God would not be understood. It was a time of cursing. His words sound like they have come from a contemporary newspaper. "And the vision of all is become unto you as the words of a book that is sealed, which men deliver to one that is learned, saying, Read this, I pray thee: and he saith, I cannot; for it is sealed: and the book is delivered to him that is not learned, saying, Read this, I pray thee: and he saith, I am not learned. Wherefore the Lord said, Forasmuch as this people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honor me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men" (Isaiah 29:11-13).

Underscore this fact in your mind: when God's Word is not comprehended by those claiming identity with Him, their heart has been removed from Him. The church must labor to avoid this happening to its constituents. No effort can be spared in the endeavor to help people comprehend the Word of God! The Sunday School plays a valuable role in making this happen. The remarkable degree of Scriptural illiteracy that exists in our day is inexcusable. This is a time of spiritual famine--like the one prophesied by Amos. "Behold, the days come, saith the Lord GOD, that I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD: and they shall wander from sea to sea, and from the north even to the east, they shall run to and fro to seek the word of the LORD, and shall not find it. In that day shall the fair virgins and young men faint for thirst" (Amos 8:11-13). How tragic that such a condition could exist! And why did it happen? Simply because God's people did not take an interest in God's Word--so He took it away. He did not remove the Scriptures themselves, but the proper delineation of them. We can avoid this judgment by seeing to it that people have a proper understanding and appreciation of the Word of God.

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# DISCUSSING THE WORD OF GOD

## Part 26

Allow for discussion in your classes: encourage it! The things of God become clearer to us as we talk about them. Recommend that questions be asked and encourage the discussion of them. Do not be afraid of entering the arena of dialogue. Avoid the practice of simply having a "class." If the objective is to understand the things of God, no effort should be spared to make that happen.

Avoid the discussion of trivia -- things that really do not bear upon eternity. Your teaching should show the superiority of the things of God, and the inferiority of the things of "this present evil world" (Gal. 1:4). The objective is to understand the Word of God, not the difficulties of life. If, in fact, you do understand the Word of God, it will shine a light on the circumstances common to humanity. On the other hand, if the Word of God is not comprehended, discussions of domestic and social issues have only thrown dust in the eyes of your members. Manage your discussions for the glory of God and the edification of the people.

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# CONCLUSION

## Part 27

The Spirit summarized the intent of the assembly: "Let all things be done unto edifying" (1 Cor. 14:26). Everything is to contribute to the strengthening of the believer in Christ. Our people must leave the assembly with an acute awareness of the provision and sufficiency of their God. Blessing must loom larger than circumstance, and "the world to come" become more dominant than "this present evil world."

A resolution to be with the Lord forever--at all cost--must grip the heart. If these things do not occur, we have met in vain. But if they do occur--and by God's grace they can--we will profit in this world and the one to come. Our assemblies must assist in orienting us for the world to come. If they do not do this, they will be a hinderance to that appointed objective.

Work together for the glory of God and the edification of one another.

Appoint leaders and teachers that will contribute to this aspiration. God will bless your efforts if you have the same goals He has revealed in His Word and through His Son.

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