

The Special Meeting

Churches meet on a regular basis. Many meet Sunday, Sunday night and Wednesday night. This is as it should be. We need to meet often to worship our God, to hear from His word, and to strengthen each other as we engage in fellowship with the saints. The word translated “church” in the New Testament is *ekklesia* and means “a called out assembly.” God wants His people to periodically and regularly assemble together to worship Him.

In addition to these regular meetings of the local assembly it has long been the practice of some of God’s people to hold what we might call “special meetings” when members of sister churches and other visitors come together for worship. In Old Testament times the scattered people of Israel had specified times when they gathered together to observe designated times of worship. Three times each year, at Pentecost, Passover, and Tabernacles, all male Israelites were to make a pilgrimage to the center of worship at Jerusalem. These feasts are recorded in Leviticus 23.

These were no doubt very special times for the Israelites. They had an opportunity to visit with friends from other parts of the country that they were able to see only at these special times. These were friends who worshipped the same God that they did. They had much in common with them and were no doubt greatly refreshed by these times of special fellowship and joint worship. We read of an account of this in Luke 2: 41-49. Joseph and Mary and the twelve-year-old Jesus went to Jerusalem for the feast of Passover. Joseph and Mary did not realize that Jesus had stayed in Jerusalem while they were on their way home. How could they have missed Him? They supposed Him to have “been in the company.” When they looked for Him they “sought him among their kinsfolk and acquaintance.” We can see a scene here of happy pilgrims going home having warm fellowship after a joyful time of worship. No doubt the adults were visiting together on their pilgrimage home and the young people were likewise having a good time together. Joseph and Mary, assuming that Jesus was with the young people, went a “day’s journey” before they missed him.

In the New Testament the Holy Spirit came to indwell the church during the feast of Pentecost. There were many worshippers from many different places present in Jerusalem on that occasion. In fact we read in Acts 2:5, "And there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven." These included “Parthians, and Medes, and Elamites, and the dwellers in Mesopotamia, and in Judaea, and Cappadocia, in Pontus, and Asia, Phrygia, and Pamphylia, in Egypt, and in the parts of Libya about Cyrene, and strangers of Rome, Jews and proselytes, Cretes and Arabians...” No doubt one of the designs of the Lord in this was that these new Christians shared a common spiritual experience that would bind them together in heart after they went back to their own homes. When people have enjoyed Spirit-filled worship services together they have a common bond of shared experience which is very precious.

The Baptists in England, Wales, and later in the United States developed the practice of meeting together at least annually in associational meetings which consisted of several days of worship and fellowship. Other churches, which are not in associations, often have practically the same experience as they have special meetings of a few days at which time visitors from sister churches come for a few days of continual worship.

Some of the Benefits of the Special Meeting

One of the major benefits to a local church of hosting a special meeting is to have the opportunity of **exercising hospitality**. The Scriptures make plain that extending hospitality is a central feature of Christian practice. We are exhorted in Hebrews 13:2, "Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares." The word translated "entertain" means "to be a host; lodge; entertain." A further exhortation is found in Romans 12:13, "Distributing to the necessity of saints; given to hospitality." The word translated "distributing" means "to share with others." The word translated "hospitality" is "*philoxenia*" and means "love of strangers." Every child of God should develop the practice of extending hospitality. This quality is absolutely essential and is required of bishops or pastors. The pastor must be "given to hospitality". (1 Tim. 3: 2). According to Titus 1: 8 he must be a "lover of hospitality." The widow who qualified as a "widow indeed" must have "lodged strangers." (1 Tim. 5: 10).

In the days of the early church this practice of extending hospitality was imperative. There were some inns but nothing like the numerous motels that we have today. A person who was traveling desperately needed a secure and comfortable place to stay at night. The apostle John commended those to whom he was writing for their thoughtful care of brethren who were traveling in 3 John 1:5-6, "Beloved, thou doest faithfully whatsoever thou doest to the brethren, and to strangers; Which have borne witness of thy charity before the church: whom if thou bring forward on their journey after a godly sort, thou shalt do well..."

Exercising hospitality requires work, sacrifice and expense. It is sad that some Christians don't seem to want to be "bothered" or to have their schedules interrupted in order to open their homes to visits from God's people. This is a sinfully selfish attitude and those who succumb to it lose great blessings. When we bless others we usually reap even greater blessings to ourselves. I am thankful that I was reared in a hospitable home. I have many precious memories of people staying in our home during special meetings. We formed many lasting friendships during these times. Many times we were benefitted by interacting with precious saints who blessed us by their godly demeanor and by their recounting rich experiences they had enjoyed from the Lord.

I am also thankful that my dear wife and children have helped me to practice hospitality. We have on many occasions had a house literally full of people staying with us during special meetings. In fact at one meeting I humorously but truthfully told the congregation: "I have some bad news and some good news. The bad news is that I slept on the kitchen floor last night. The good news is that I slept next to the refrigerator!"

One time dear Brother Guna from India stayed in our home and was moved when he discovered that my wife and I had slept on the floor. When I was in India one time he used this as an example of hospitality that he hoped his people would emulate. A dear preacher friend of mine and some people with him arrived at our home late one night. He was greatly moved when my dear wife fed them even though the hour was late. He has mentioned this to me several times over the years.

Sometimes people are reluctant to open their homes to visitors because they don't believe their homes are spacious enough or they may not be perfectly clean. Don't let such things stand in the way. Many times visitors have had wonderful spiritual times in small, crowded homes where the Spirit of the Lord was present. While we should strive to be as clean and orderly as possible, we will wait forever if we wait until things are perfect.

So an additional benefit of showing hospitality is to set a good example for others. Christians should learn from each other and should have a good influence on each other. The wise man wrote in Proverbs 27:17, "Iron sharpeneth iron; so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend."

Still another benefit from practicing hospitality is that this will foster warm fellowship among the churches. While each local assembly stands alone before God, the churches should show great love toward one another and should cooperate with one another. It is obvious from his epistles that Paul was very concerned that the churches stay in touch with each other. He wrote very personal letters to them, calling individual names and informing them of each other. He collected money from the more prosperous churches to distribute to those in need. It is encouraging to visit like-minded churches and to realize that there are others who love the same things that we do and who have the same struggles in this sinful world that we have.

People from small and struggling churches tend to become discouraged and may develop the "lone ranger" attitude that Elijah did. They may conclude that they are all alone in their spiritual struggles. How encouraging it is when members of different churches can come together for worship and encouraging fellowship.

A very practical benefit of visitation among churches is the fact that many young people have found their spouses in such settings. Could there be any better place to meet a suitable mate for life than in a church meeting?

Preparing for the Special Meeting

Looking forward to and preparing for a special meeting can be great fun. Just anticipating the saints who will come and worship with us, should fill us with joy and anticipation. It is very interesting to read of how God's people prepared for their associational meetings in the 1800s and early 1900s. They did not have freezers and many of the modern conveniences we have today. They would kill and cure meat from hogs and cattle and prepare for large numbers of people. The sisters would can many vegetables and fruits. Often some of the church members would house many guests, some as many as forty or fifty! They would get fresh straw, put it in their hay lofts and bed down many men. They planned ahead and they did it with joy.

We live in different times but the principles are the same. Some visitors, of course, prefer to stay in motels. This should not hinder us from gladly opening our homes to the Lord's people. In this day of canned goods, frozen foods, air mattresses, air conditioners, and other conveniences we should be able, with a little planning to prepare to take care of many people during our special meetings.

Even more important than the physical preparation is the spiritual preparation. We should be much in prayer. We should pray individually, in our families, in our church services and in called prayer meetings. We serve a pray-hearing, prayer-answering God. We must recognize our total dependence on Him. As the verse from the song clearly states, "All is vain unless the Spirit of the Holy One comes down."

We should also make plans to attend as much of the meeting as possible. This means clearing our calendars, the men perhaps taking some of their vacation days, etc. It would be well for us to imitate Mary as she took the time to sit at Jesus' feet, when He came for a visit. The Lord said of her in Luke

10:42, "But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her."

Gleaning from the Special Meeting

What spiritual advantages can we look forward to as we prepare for our meeting? We can consider it as a retreat, a special time to temporarily withdraw from the worldly influences that surround us. This is periodically necessary for the spiritual health of the child of God. The Lord Jesus recognized that sometimes His disciples needed to temporarily withdraw from their normal duties and to rest. He said in Mark 6:31, "... Come ye yourselves apart into a desert place, and rest a while..." We need spiritual rest as well as physical rest.

The special meeting is a good time to briefly imitate the church as she was in her earliest days. We read of these joyous times in Acts 2:42, "And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers."

We should be prepared to listen carefully to each sermon, to see if God is speaking to us through the preached word. While we should show our pastors the utmost respect as the men of God that He has placed over us, it is sometimes refreshing to hear preaching from men we do not normally hear.

We should anticipate making new friends and cultivating deep spiritual friendships. We should look forward to having warm fellowship with the guests in our homes and in having good, profitable godly conversations as we eat and as we have breaks from the preaching services.

One of the things that I enjoyed at associational meetings when I was a boy was to sit and listen to the preachers and other brethren discuss Scriptures as they sat outside under trees in between preaching services. When preachers came home with us, we often benefitted by their spiritual conversation and example.

Sometimes it might be convenient for some of the older women to get off with the younger women and girls and to give them counsel. This is exactly what is taught in Titus 2:3-5, "The aged women likewise, that they be in behaviour as becometh holiness, not false accusers, not given to much wine, teachers of good things; That they may teach the young women to be sober, to love their husbands, to love their children, To be discreet, chaste, keepers at home, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God be not blasphemed."

While the Meeting is In Progress

While we are enjoying the meeting let us make sure that we are continuing to think of others and to not be self-centered. Let us be observant to the needs of others, especially to the needs of our visitors. Make sure everyone feels welcome. If we see someone who seems to be lonely we must seek to befriend them and to let them know how very welcome they are. Our young people should not be in cliques, but should reach out to those they do not know so well and to those who seem to be shy.

There are many logistical issues that are always a factor when we entertain a number of people. There is food preparation, clean-up, garbage disposal, and similar tasks that must be performed. It makes things

much easier if everyone finds a way to help. It is not right to place the bulk of the burdens on a few dedicated people.

Some of the young adults may offer their services to mothers who have several small children to take care of.

Some Things to Be Avoided

We must always be on our spiritual guard on all occasions. During our meeting, while we do enjoy fellowship, we must not concentrate on that to the exclusion of worshipping the Lord. For example, the young people could be so excited by being with their friends they could partially forget what we are met for. We must strive to maintain our spiritual focus.

It is also important that even during the meeting we try to find short periods of time when we do some personal Bible reading and praying. It is necessary that even when with the Lord's people we keep up our personal communion with the Lord.

We also must not let the meeting become an end in itself. The most important thing in serving God is consistent, obedient service. This we must do at all times. It is not just when we have a lot of people present that we should be enthusiastic about serving God.

Another big mistake we could make is just not to come to many of the services. It is impossible to get the full benefit unless we are present. Others can tell us of how good the preaching was, but that is not the same as being there.

A Word of Warning

We need to have a deep appreciation of the blessings that God bestows on us. We must not despise them or take them for granted. We have been blessed with religious liberty in our country all the days of our lives. There is no guarantee that this will continue forever. The forces of evil and repression are obviously at work. We must make every effort to enjoy and participate in the things this liberty permits.

It is also true that we have enjoyed material prosperity for a very long time. We just take it for granted that we will always have transportation and enough money to provide fuel to go just about anywhere we desire. This could come to an end. Unemployment is high and the economy is in trouble and probably headed for much more serious trouble. While we have the means to travel and worship God with others we should do so.

The Most Important Consideration

Of course the most important thing about anything we do is that God be glorified and His kingdom advanced. It certainly glorifies God when people make sacrifices of love to worship Him with His saints. Surely God must be pleased to see a large number of His saints coming together to worship Him and to fellowship around His glorious Person and Work. When we are blessed to entertain a special

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meeting let us follow the injunction laid out in Colossians 3:23, "And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men..."

We know from Scripture that God is pleased when His children meet together in fellowship to worship His name. We can see this plainly from Malachi 3:16, "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."

When we serve God by serving His people, we sometimes become weary in body. We may work hard, maybe even behind the scene, and it is possible that no one will notice our service. But there is One who always sees what we are doing, and when we serve His people He is always pleased. We learn this comforting truth from Hebrews 6:10, "For God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labour of love, which ye have shewed toward his name, in that ye have ministered to the saints, and do minister."

To God be the glory; to us be the great blessing!