

## CHURCH MEETINGS

*"Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching."* Heb 10:25

The fact that the reality of the church can only be experienced through the Holy Spirit has several practical applications. One of the most obvious of these applications has to do with our church meetings. Meetings of the church must be in the Holy Spirit. To be in the Holy Spirit means that they must be full of the Holy Spirit and they must be led by the Holy Spirit. Only this kind of church meeting will be truly satisfying to us. Only this kind of meeting is pleasing to God. If our meetings do not meet these criteria, then they do not qualify as being genuine church meetings.

These statements may seem rather strong. Yet this is exactly what the Bible teaches. When Jesus was talking to the woman at the well, He made some statements which are very interesting. In response to this woman's inquiry about the proper way to worship God, He replied: "But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers 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 (Jn 4:23,24)." These verses still speak to us today. Here God has plainly told us that our worship (both individual and in meetings) must have this spiritual quality. We the members of His body, must be in the Spirit\* to be genuinely worshipping God.

Another verse, Philippians 3:3, also strongly bears out this truth. Paul says that "we are the circumcision, which worship God in the spirit...and have no confidence in the flesh (that is, in the outward things)."

Being "in the Spirit" requires firstly that our hearts be open to God through Jesus Christ. When we enter a Christian meeting, we should also open our hearts to the heavenly Father and seek Him that He could fill us and minister to us. We should also from our spirit pour out our worship and our praise to Him. Without opening our heart, our spirit, and in fact our whole being to God, it is impossible to be genuinely worshipping. Merely going through the motions of certain rituals or ceremonies is of no value. To God, this empty worship is not pleasing. We must be experiencing the presence of the Holy Spirit in our midst.

Some may say: "Is it not enough simply to be meeting in Jesus' name? Must we also be in the Spirit? Does not the Bible teach us that wherever two or three are gathered together in the name of Jesus, there He is in the midst (Mt 18:20)?" It is true that Jesus promises in His Word that when we meet in His name, His presence will be

there among us. However, in order to properly understand what this means, we must thoroughly investigate what it means to be meeting in Jesus' name.

\*NOTE: In the Bible it is often difficult to distinguish between the big "S" Spirit (the Holy Spirit) and the little "s" spirit (the human spirit). Due to the fact that the original Greek language has only capital letters, there was no way for the translators to differentiate between the two except from the context. Yet in many cases even the context does not make it clear which word is intended. The problem is further complicated because of the mysterious union of God's Spirit with man's which occurs at the new birth. John 3:6 states that "that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." It is our human spirit which is born of the Holy Spirit when we receive the Lord. I Corinthians 6:17 further amplifies this point by saying: "But he that is joined unto the the Lord is one spirit." From this it should be evident that it is impossible to be in, or worship in, the spirit without being in the Spirit also.

The Person of Jesus is intimately associated with His name. Apart from the person and the reality of Jesus Christ, the name Jesus means nothing. Therefore, to be or to meet in Jesus' name means to meet in Jesus. Let us read one simple verse to illustrate this point. In John 1:12 we read: "But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name." These people, who believed on the name of Jesus, believed on Jesus. They did not believe upon some name separate from the person of Jesus Christ. There is no way to separate the name of Jesus from Himself. From this discussion, we should be able to see that to meet in Jesus' name means to enter into the person and reality of Jesus. When we enter into Him, then we are genuinely meeting in His name.

As we have previously discussed, to enter into Jesus means to enter into the Holy Spirit, because Jesus Christ today is known and apprehended through the Holy Spirit. It is only by the Holy Spirit that we can experience Jesus in any real way. The Bible says in II Corinthians 3:17, "Now the Lord is that Spirit." Today, the reality of the Lord Jesus is in the Spirit. He "is that Spirit." And we must be in that Spirit to be in Him. This is what the Bible refers to as meeting in His "name." It is the only way we can be genuinely worshipping.

Not only should our church meetings be conducted in the Holy Spirit; but in any church meeting the members of Christ's body must be open to the Holy Spirit's leading. He is the one who should be leading and directing our church meetings. We do not need a "program" or a "schedule." Such things only hinder and confine Him. What we do need, however, is for each member to be open and sensitive to His leading. Every member of His body must be in living contact with Him during the meeting so that they can discern what He would have them to do. The result of this kind of openness and sensitivity among worshippers will be meetings which are more in tune with and full of the Holy Spirit. Since God is seeking this kind of worship, when He finds it, His blessing will be upon it. Let us therefore obey Him and submit ourselves to Him so that we may be partaking of this blessing.

Participation in New Testament church meetings was the responsibility of every member. I Corinthians 14:26 reads: "when ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying." Here we see that each member of the body has a portion and a part in church meetings. Each one must have the opportunity to share. When this opportunity for every member to function is taken away, the leading, moving and operation of the Holy Spirit is limited. He is thereby confined to work only in predetermined ways. The effect of this will be to put a damper on our church meetings.

Thus, the Holy Spirit is quenched. When the functioning of the members of the body is limited, it becomes difficult to have truly spiritual meetings. We begin to fail to meet the requirements of the New Testament, which is to worship in Spirit and in truth. And when the Holy Spirit is lacking, so are our meetings.

Yes, there must be some control and authority in church meetings. The authority of the Holy Spirit is an essential ingredient. In order to maintain this authority, there must be those present in every meeting who have much experience and knowledge of Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. There must be members present who know the Lord's authority and are able to convey this authority to the church meeting (usually this authority rests upon the apostles, prophets and teachers). In this way, God's authority—His control over meetings—is manifested through those members of the body who can discern and transmit His authority.

A church meeting should not be chaotic. We know that the scripture exhorts us that everything be done decently and in order (I Cor 14:40). Decency and order, however, are not contrary to the leading of the Holy Spirit. We only must be sensitive to His leading and have some in our midst who know His authority and are able to channel the meeting in the direction of the Holy Spirit's leading. Church meetings which are conducted in this way give much opportunity for God to accomplish His purposes. He knows every need of each individual in a meeting. As He prompts the members of His body to teach and preach, testify, sing, or pray, ministry comes forth from Him. Through this ministry, He is able to meet each need and speak to each individual. He is able to minister to His body through the members of His body. This is an essential element of New Testament Christianity. Anything which deprives the Holy Spirit of this authority is not of God and is a hindrance to the proper functioning of Christ's body.

As you may have already realized, church meetings generally do not need to be of great size. It is not necessary to gather hundreds of Christians together into one place. Having great numbers of Christians gather together does not always enhance church meetings. In order for each member of the body to have the opportunity to function, it would seem that meetings should normally be of a smaller size. One brother I know recommended that church meetings be what he referred to as "lamb size" meetings. This concept is from the Old Testament in the book of Exodus, where the children of Israel were instructed to slay a lamb and to eat it together. They were supposed to invite enough people to their house so that everyone could partake, and also so that there wouldn't be anything left over. This brother thought that church meetings should be of such a size that everyone would be able to participate and get fed. Of course there is no scriptural regulation concerning the size of Christian meetings. Yet the principle of each member functioning is indispensable.

There is no doubt that the church often may have special kinds of meetings which are of a larger size. In the book of Acts, we have a record of one such incident. When the Apostle Paul came to the city of Troas, he preached to a whole roomful of people, evidently all night. This was a special kind of a meeting for the purpose of ministry. Here was an anointed apostle of God who had come to town on this special occasion. The believers wanted to spend as much time listening to his preaching as possible in order to receive as much from him as they could. So today in the church, there are many special kinds of ministry. On some occasions the church of God should gather in larger numbers to worship and to receive from ministries. However, on a more regular basis, we as believers need to be gathering together to worship, pray, and receive ministering from the Holy Spirit in smaller numbers.

So we see there are actually two general types of public Christian meetings. There are "church" meetings where the body of Christ is expressed and all the members have opportunity to minister one to another. There are also "ministry" meetings where special ministers perform their ministry. (Interestingly, most Christian meetings today would seem to be closer to the second type of meeting than the first. In many Christian gatherings there is little expression of the body of Christ. Yet this is what most consider "church." In reality such meetings are not much like the scriptural idea of church meetings, but are special meetings for the purpose of ministry.)