

What is the relationship between assemblies?

Part 1

Speaker	Andrew Poots
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[00:00:00] I've been asked to speak about the relationship between assemblies, Christian assemblies, but there's a much more fundamental question than that, because there's no point in discussing church questions with you if you do not know the Lord Jesus Christ as your personal Savior. If you have not that relationship, if you've not been born again, if there's not a work of God in your soul, you're on the road to hell, and you're in for a shock. You may have a Christian upbringing, you may be going there with your eyes open, you may be from another background, these truths may be new to you, you may not know anything about it, but the end of those who obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ is sad. This is life eternal, the Lord Jesus said, [00:01:03] to know thee the only true God and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent.

There's one God, one true God revealed in the Bible, and there's only one Savior, there's only one mediator between God and man, God and man, the man Christ Jesus, and it's very important that you attend to the message of this prophet that God has raised up, the last true prophet. God previously spoke in many parts and in many ways unto the fathers by the prophets, people like Abraham, but he has in these last days spoken unto us. The last revelation of God is through the Lord Jesus Christ, and if you do not attend to the message that he brings to us, there's no hope for you, [00:02:04] and there's no point even in talking about these church questions, but I'm supposing, and I do trust and pray that each one here knows the Lord Jesus Christ as their personal Savior, or if they do not yet know the Lord Jesus that they might consider his claims. He's your Lord, God has made him both Lord and Christ, he ascended from the dead, he's raised, he's glorified, he's in heaven, and he's the one who's going to come again for those who belong to him. So first of all, we need to trust in the Lord Jesus Christ and have a personal experience of him in our life. I'm supposing also that you've had the privilege of Christian baptism conferred on you, and that you are at least externally identified with the profession of Christianity here in this world. And then there was another important question which two of the speakers touched on, and that's a question of the charismatic gifts. [00:03:04] That's a big question for believers, which we all have to face. These miraculous gifts, these signed gifts, have they died out, or are they still present in the church? In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul wrote, tongues shall cease. And if we read church history, we have a pretty clear indication of when they ceased and passed out of existence. And we have to ask ourselves, is there any warrant in the word of God for these to be revived? The beginning of the Mosaic dispensation, the period when God was dealing with the children of Israel and the principle of law, Moses did signs, wonders

in the land of Egypt. But you know, John the Baptist was at the end of that period of time, and specifically said of John, John did no miracle. So there are signs that are associated [00:04:01] with the apostles, and it's a legitimate question, are we to expect these things to be continued today? You know, we see these tele-evangelists and people like Benny Hinn, they stand up and they're making people fall backwards. You know, the only people in the New Testament that I'm aware of that fell backwards in the presence of the Lord Jesus were his enemies. When they came to apprehend him in John's gospel, he said, I am he, I am the great Jehovah, I am. They all went backward and fell to the ground. People who owned his claims, who were Christians, they fell on their face. The wise men, the Magi worshipped him. Peter fell down at his feet. They bowed before him. They didn't fall backward. Or take someone like Joyce Mayer. Paul says, I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over a man. [00:05:01] He says that the women are to keep silence in the church. How can these things be right? Okay, these may just be a more extreme manifestation of a tendency which began at the beginning of the 20th century. But we have to ask ourselves, are these things legitimate? Are they owned of God? Can God signal his approval of Pentecostals who don't even believe in the Trinity, who believe in Jesus only, who are astray, fundamentally astray doctrinally, and yet they seem to have the same manifestations amongst them as others who have a true view of Christ and of the Father and of God, the Holy Spirit. So this is a big question. And it's a question really, the cessation of the charisma or the continuation of these things in the church. That has been looked at. And then the next question coming in the order I'm indicating [00:06:03] is, what about your ecclesiastical associations? Where you are? Ecclesia, we've talked a lot about church, about the assembly. The translation of the Greek word ecclesia, meaning a called out company.

People come together in another passage in a secular context in the book of Acts, it means a lawful assembly. They could have a lawful assembly. In the Geneva Bible, the Puritan Bible, it was translated congregation. King James, for political expediency, he changed, he had the translators change the word back into an ecclesiastical word, church, which doesn't mean, I mean, it means different things to different people. You go to church, you go to the service, you go into the church, you could be going into the ministry, or you could be going into the church building. So there's an element of confusion in [00:07:08] the word church, and we use the word church, and we use the word assembly interchangeably. But the literal translation probably would favor the use of the word assembly. So, in your own locality, where do you stand in regard to a church position, assuming that there is clear instruction in the word of God, and this is where the rubber hits the ground in your particular situation, be it Norwich, or St. Andrews, whatever your locality is, that's where the question is important to you. It's not a question of Bombay, or Tokyo, or Sydney, or Rome, or Canterbury, or Jerusalem, or Constantinople. We're talking about the [00:08:05] assembly relationships, and this brings in the thought of the local assembly. So basically, what does the scriptures teach about the local assembly? I think the first thing we have to do is, in line with what our previous brother has said, we have to abstract ourselves from all the confusion around us and turn to the word of God, because I think we've seen that Christendom does not answer to the mind of God. If you think of the Christianity of the Middle Ages, with celibate priests distinct from the laity, forbidden to marry, taking contributes. If you think popes putting their illegitimate sons into bishoprics and archbishoprics, is according to scripture, or the idea that you can buy indulgences, pay some money over to the [00:09:06] church so that it can build St. Peter's Basilica, and your mother, or father, or friend, or relative will get out of purgatory, this supposed intermediate place for souls, and go to heaven. As soon as money in the coffer wrings, the soul from purgatory springs. We all can see clearly that such corruptions are not according to the word of God. But as we look around us today, all the confusion, 1,500 churches and growing, and you could look up encyclopedias about differences in church doctrine and teaching and distinction. Is it according to the word of God, is the question. Some

people go here, some people go there, some people go anywhere.

Some people say, go nowhere. I'll just be a Christian at home, I can have fellowship in my own house. So what I'm saying is, we have to abstract our minds from anything we see around [00:10:08] us, or anything indeed that we see. In the cycle of church history, and in the book of Ezekiel, it speaks about the pattern of the house. And Moses, in making the tabernacle, he was instructed that he was to be very careful to make all things according to the pattern. So we need to look at the pattern, and with that in view, I'd like to read from 1 Corinthians chapter 1. Verse 9 might be a starting point. God is faithful.

And then, Corinthians is a book which deals with the church or assembly in a local setting.

[00:11:10] So if we want to learn about the assembly in a locality, and if we want to learn about relationships between assemblies, a study of the Corinthian epistles is a good starting point. In verse 2, Paul writes, unto the church of God which is at Corinth. Then it gives a description, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called saints, or saints by divine calling, with all that in every place, call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours. And then, just for completion, in 2 Corinthians chapter 1, where Paul is writing a second epistle, and in the latter part of verse 1 he says, unto the church of God which is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in Achaia.

[00:12:04] Now, the first point I want to make, and it can't be emphasized enough, and we've already had it, every figure in the New Testament which speaks of the assembly testifies of its unity. It's presented as one flock. It's presented under the figure of a house, the house of God.

It's presented as the temple, a growing temple. Paul speaks of it as one new man.

We've already had it brought before us in its character as the bride, the bride of Christ. It's the body of Christ. Christ is the head of the body. If there were more than one body, it would be a monstrosity. One head and one body. And yet, in men's organizations, [00:13:03] there are so many different bodies and denominations and associations. And in the verse I've read here, God is faithful by whom you're called unto the fellowship of his son, Jesus Christ our Lord. So it's a unique fellowship. We could almost say it's an exclusive fellowship. It's the only fellowship, the one fellowship, to which all believers are called. Of course, many people believe the church is going to be complete in heaven. They don't have any doubts. You know, we all get to glory. We're all going to be together. But that's not the comparison that's presented in the scripture. In John 10, 16, the Lord says, other sheep I have which are not of this fold. That was the Jewish fold. You're speaking about believers who would come from the nations. He says, them also I must bring. And then he says, there shall be not one fold, as in the King James version, but the literal [00:14:04] translation is there shall be one flock and one shepherd. That's what he was talking about on earth, one flock and one shepherd. And similarly in John's gospel chapter 17 and verse 20, we have the Lord's prayer, high priestly prayer. And speaking of the disciples, he says, neither pray I for these alone, but for them also who shall believe on me through their work, that they all may be one. Christ prayed for the oneness of believers. And this was a manifested unity.

This was a unity that ought to have been seen. And indeed for some moments of time in the early history, the book of Acts was seen that others, that the world may believe that God has sent me. Christian unity in the world should be such that those who look on Christianity can say, yes, [00:15:05] that points to Christ. The unity of this people points to Christ. Now, sadly, that's not the case. Our

disunity is a legend to those who are outside the pale of Christianity. And in 1 Corinthians 12, 13, in the power of one spirit, we've all been baptized into one body. And there's a very interesting verse in Ephesians chapter two, where it says in verse 10, sorry, Ephesians 3 verse 10, to the intent that now, that's not future, that's just present time. That's the church's history on earth. That now onto the principality and powers in heavenly places, angelic intelligences, heavenly spectators, says should be known by the church or by the assembly, the manifold wisdom of [00:16:06] God. And if you look at the context of the chapter and look at chapter two, it's the one new man, it's God taking Jews out of their Jewishness, Jewish believers and Gentiles from their background amongst the nations and making them one, one in Christ. So this is a unity which should be seen on earth. And indeed it was on the day of Pentecost. Remember our first speaker told us from Matthew 16, that Abraham wasn't in the church, nor John the Baptist, nor any of the old Testament saints. They were blessed and they will be blessed. And we're blessed with faithful Abraham. And they'll be in Abraham, Isaac and Jacob will sit down in the kingdom of God. They'll share in the heavenly blessedness. That's not the same thing as a church. It's the assembly. [00:17:04] The assembly is in a special relationship to Christ and will be to all eternity. And when the Lord Jesus spoke in Matthew 16, he said on this rock, I will build my assembly. It was future. And he tells her that it would not be formed until he was glorified. It says this Holy Spirit was not yet because Jesus was not yet glorified on the day of Pentecost. There was a sign of a rushing mighty. And it came and tons of fire sat upon them, the 120 in the upper room. And it filled the whole building. The Holy Spirit took up his personal dwelling on earth just as really and truly as Christ in our incarnation came to this earth. And the Holy Spirit is present in the assembly. A divine person has taken his residence on earth. And in that connection, the assembly is the house of God. And it was formed [00:18:09] in answer to the Lord's prophecy on the day of Pentecost. And there at Jerusalem, the believers were all together. They were all together and did all things in common. That's the assembly. And there was persecution. They spread out. After the conversion of Saul, the church had rest throughout Judea or the churches, depending on what Greek text you're from. The point is this. Local assemblies are local representations of the assembly.

It's a matter of geography. As the testimony spread, as believers moved out, they were no longer all together in one place. And so other companies were formed, local congregations, local churches. But essentially, it was a question of geography. Essentially, [00:19:02] the church of God is one according to God's mind throughout the world.

So in each particular locality where the saints of God, where believers are found, they're a representation of the whole. They're a representation. They're a microcosm. They're a replica of the wider thought. And the same relationship, which applies more generally, applies locally in Corinthians. The Greek article is not there in the Greek, but you can't say a body of Christ. They are body of Christ. Characteristically, they are the body of Christ. At Corinth, the Christian company was the body of Christ, characteristically, and members in particular. So we're members one of another.

[00:20:02] Well, you tell me if I'm wrong, but as far as I can see, there's no such of a thing as membership of a local church in the New Testament scriptures. We're members of the universal church. We're members of the body of Christ. We're members one of another. We're of the house of God. And that actually sets aside man's ideas.

Because even in that church, which describes itself as holy and Roman and Catholic and apostolic, and some of those things are contradiction in terms, but in the Roman Catholic church actually comes down to the parochial system. And you're in a parish church and you belong to a particular parish. You've got a parish priest and you're baptized. You go on the church register. You're a

communicant. You go on the church register. For all that's posted Catholicism, it is local members. Come to the Reformation, national churches were formed.

[00:21:08] Church of England, Church of Scotland, the Lutheran Church in Germany and the various churches in the cantons of Switzerland and throughout the world. The idea of a national church. You don't read of national churches in the New Testament. And then the dissenting churches and those who came out of national churches, particular Baptist, particular membership.

Almost all churches have local membership. And this is so contrary to what's found in the Word of God. So we have to see, we have to abstract ourselves from what we see around us and we have to seek to have God's mind. And then when we have that, we're able to see where our responsibilities lie. But while administration is local, we're just carrying out the mind of God in [00:22:06] a locality, just in the same way that other believers are doing in other localities. And in the notes, which I'm not going to go into now, there's a case study of how this unity was kept up in the book of Acts between the Jews and the work in Judea. And then the Samaritans were brought in. And then with Cornelius, the Gentiles were brought in. And then there were questions that arose between the Gentiles and the Jews. And they had the meeting at Jerusalem. So it's very interesting to see the way the unity of the spirit was preserved in the early church in the book of Acts. And here we have it in first Corinthians. We've said it's the fellowship, the one fellowship, the fellowship of God's son, to which all believers have been called. And there's the assembly of God, which is at Corinth. That's a specific locality. And then there are those at Corinth. It tells us all believers at Corinth were of the assembly [00:23:08] there. And then it winds up all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. That's other localities. All those in other places, in every place throughout the world, this was God's thought, a local assembly at Corinth. And in every place where believers were found, the letter was addressed to them also, a responsibility in localities. In the second epistle, all the saints who are in Achaia, that's the region that surrounded Corinth. So that then was how the church was in New Testament times. Someone was received at Corinth. He was received into the privileges of the assembly of God into the fellowship there. And wherever he traveled, it was the same fellowship. And they had letters. They had letters of commendation. In fact, the epistle to Romans was a letter given to the deaconess Phoebe [00:24:05] at Corinth. So that when she was a letter rather to Rome from Corinth or from Cynthia, commending that sister to the brethren, this was the way the unity was preserved in practice. If someone was unknown and visiting a different locality or a different country, there was a letter given saying, she's of the assembly, she or he's a Christian believer, and please receive them to the privileges of the Christian assembly. Corinth, where a matter of discipline came in, and there'd been some on immorality. And Paul says, put away from among yourselves that wicked person. He was delivered onto the sphere of Satan. There was a within and without. Do you seriously believe he could have been outside of the church at Corinth and received down the road at Ephesus or Philippi? Nonsense. There was a unity of discipline. There was a unity of mind. [00:25:02] There was a unity of judgment. If someone was outside in one place, if he was considered not fit for Christian fellowship in one place, he was considered not fit for Christian fellowship in every place. If he was received into Christian fellowship in one place, he was received into Christian fellowship everywhere. And that's how it should be today. That's how it should be amongst ourselves. But have we said, well, there's so much confusion all around us. What's the answer? We can't reconstruct the church. We can't wipe the slate clean. We can't go back to the drawing board and start all over again. We have to accept the dilapidation of the church and the ruination that has come in or the difficult conditions. And the last days, perilous times shall come. We're in them now. There's a lot of confusion in Christian circles. So what are we to do? Well, the answer is in 2 Timothy 2, which has been looked at, and there's a resource for us in Matthew 18, 20, where two or three are gathered together [00:26:05] onto

my name, there am I in the midst of them. That's a resource for us. If we want to go back to God's original ground, if we want to seek to, we can only seek to answer to the scriptures. We can't claim to be the assembly of God in any particular place. We have it in the English language too, and in French we speak about l'assemblée, and in German the Versammlung. But in English, we make a distinction. Sometimes we speak about the assembly, but it's very current amongst us to talk about the meeting, going to the meeting, and the meeting does this, or the meeting does that, or such and such a meeting. There's a slight nuance there, but the change in the language indicates that the significance and the realization that we are not the assembly of God, and we do not make any claims to be exclusively the assembly of God in any particular place. Rather, we simply gather on the ground of [00:27:04] the church of God. We gather on that basis. We gather according to the principles. We seek to answer the truth of scripture, even if there be only two or three in a city or in a particular locality. Where two or three are gathered together in my name, we have the assurance of the presence of Christ. He says, there am I in the midst of them. We had to give a definition, I think, of what constitutes recognition of assemblies was one of the points in the program. I came across this extract from C. H. McIntosh, which I think is relevant. It says, the ground on which Christians should gather is stated in Ephesians 4, verse 4, there is one body. That is beyond the unity of the assembly. Then he says, there are three tests by which to try all who profess to be gathered on the ground of the church of God. It is not as Calvin stated, you know, where the [00:28:03] word of God is preached and where the Christian sacraments are properly administered. Because where in the New Testament is there anything about sacraments being administered? But rather, the three points that he gives is, is the absolute authority of the word of God owned in all things? So, dear friends, are you in an environment where the absolute authority of the word of God is recognized in all things? Not just for your personal salvation, but for the way in which we come together in the church. And then, is the free action, secondly, is the free action of the Holy Spirit fully allowed in worship and ministry?

If we had a system of pastors or clergymen or made an artificial distinction between clergy and laity, or if we had a worship leader with someone to direct the saints, that really is [00:29:01] infringing on the rights of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit indwells every believer, every believer that have believed the gospel salvation is sealed by the Holy Spirit. He leads, he guides, we have to walk in the Spirit, we had some exhortations, we have to be filled with the Spirit, we're not to quench the Spirit, and we're not to grieve the Holy Spirit. And there should not, when we come together in worship or in dependence on the Lord to speak by whom he will, there should not be any human organization. I know we have to come together at a certain time, and we have to come together in a certain place, but when we're together, we should sit quietly, patiently perhaps, prayerfully, reverently, we should be waiting on God, we should be waiting on the Holy Spirit to use a brother here or a brother there, to be a mouthpiece of the assembly, prayer, or worship, or thanksgiving, or we should be looking to the [00:30:06] Lord to give, as we heard about the gifts, to gift someone and to use someone to exercise that gift as an evangelist, or pastor, or teacher, there are many gifts, some of them were enumerated, and we haven't time to go into them now. But this is a very important second point, is the free action of the Holy Spirit fully allowed in worship and ministry? And then the third point, something which is greatly ignored today, is the purity of the Lord's table duly maintained by godly discipline in reference to bad doctrine and evil conduct? Because we're taught doctrine and conduct are two important areas, and we can also bring in, I suppose, a third question there, that's the question of association, because a little leaven leavens the whole lump, whether it be doctrinal error, [00:31:02] or whether it be moral evil, if these things are tolerated, then they begin to affect others also, others are leavened, are affected by what happens. So there has to be a purity in the fellowship, there has to be godly discipline, and bad doctrine and evil conduct has to be dealt with. And Macintosh went on to say, wherever you cannot find these things, it is not the church of God at all, it's not on that ground. So we

have to practice these truths in order to answer to the mind of God in a local setting. The other point, and I know time is almost gone, assembly administration is local, it's always local. The matter that cropped up at Corinth was a matter for the Corinthians to deal with, and that's very much the case today, and decisions taken in one local assembly, therefore, should be respected by the other [00:32:01] assemblies. And I'm not going to dwell on this point too much, because Brother Simon Atwood, I believe, will be dealing with the matter of discipline in the assembly. But there's perfect competence in the locality to deal with local administration. That's a point that's worth underlining. Of course, the question does arise, what constitutes locality? And we saw that in a locality, in a city or in a town, there was always the church of God there. When it comes to a district such as Galatia, the province, there were numerous assemblies, but in the scriptures, even though at Jerusalem, believers in Jerusalem, they were breaking bread from house to house, they were breaking bread at home, and there were very numerous counties, over 5,000 eventually, and growing, and it's probably impossible that physically they could have come together in one [00:33:02] precise locality, but they met together, characteristically, they met together in fellowship with each other. And this is a point worth stressing, and a brother whose name has been mentioned by an earlier speaker has written, I think this important in connection with our subject, the idea of several independent assemblies in one city is very widely held, and perhaps increasingly held. The result, he says, is a spirit of independency which is gravely opposed to the maintenance of that fellowship into which our faithful God has called us. Referring to Corinthians, he says, the epistle is directed to every locality where there are Christians, and to all Christians in that locality, so that that which is instruction for one meeting in a city is instruction for every meeting in that city. So there's a question [00:34:05] of unity in a city or a location. And I think also the spirit of God is perfectly competent today.

Both Corinthians at Corinth and at Ephesus, the assembly was referred to as the temple of God. There was light there, and there's sufficient light from God, and there's sufficient authority in the presence of the Holy Spirit to deal with local matters, primarily in their own locality. We know, of course, that if an assembly is not prepared to function in the way of discipline or to answer to the mind of scriptures, they can be prevailed on from other believers, first and foremost, in the adjacent assemblies. But matters of administration are carried on in localities. I know that in the book of Acts that certain questions were decided at Jerusalem, [00:35:03] but we don't have any earthly center or any earthly headquarters today. We don't go up to Jerusalem, and we don't have apostles, and we don't have elders, and we can't call an assembly of that nature together. And I very much question if any company of brethren on a national level or on whatever level you wish to have it comes together. I do not think that we could say today in the same way as it is said in Acts 15, it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us. That was a time of transition from Judaism to Christianity. Our center today is not at Jerusalem nor at any other earthly center, but our resource is in the Spirit of God and in administration in localities. So that governs and defines the relationship, the interrelationship between assemblies in various localities, because essentially they are expressions of the one [00:36:01] assembly of God on earth, and actions taken in one should be recognized in the others.