

A Stated Day

We know of at least one church of the New Testament which assembled for spiritual activity on the first day of the week (Acts 20:6-12). And by ‘spiritual activity’, I include all this: ‘They continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers’ (Acts 2:42).

For what is church life? Certainly it is far more than attendance at meetings. But it does involve such.¹ It is very clear that the early churches saw gatherings as a means to express their worship of God,² to call upon him in prayer, and to nurture their spiritual life, and do so in a mutual way; indeed, their meetings were a vital necessity for them.³ It

¹ But meeting for the sake of meeting is, spiritually speaking, worse than useless. Speaking personally, I have to confess that I have grown disenchanted with institutional church life as presently constituted and experienced. For a start, I find precious little fellowship! For fellowship, I need to be able to give and to receive. In general, I am allowed or afforded opportunity for neither. ‘Receiving’ should not be confined to sitting, listening to a man lecture, while he stands, remote and separate, far removed from us, behind an impenetrable barrier. See my *Sowed*.

² Just because ‘worship’ has been badly institutionalised, it does not mean we should drop the term. God the Father seeks true spiritual worshippers (John 4:23-24). True, he seeks the worship of his people on a private and secret basis (Matt. 6:1-18), but Christ gathers with his people in their assemblies (Matt. 18:20). His power is there with them (1 Cor. 5:4). Even his angels take an interest (1 Cor. 11:10).

³ But not for reaching unbelievers. The early churches did not consider their meetings as a primary means of evangelism; quite the opposite. To put it no stronger, the attendance of the unconverted was not uppermost in the minds of the saints (1 Cor. 14:23-25). Reaching unbelievers was something which took place *outside* the assemblies. Indeed, the derivation of *ekklēsia* leads to this conclusion: *ekklēsia* from *ekkalēō*, ‘out of to call’; that is, the church is made up of those who are called out from the world.

A Stated Day

was not only a question of obedience to a command (Heb. 10:23-25); it was a question of delight. The New Testament is filled with the evidence. Right from the start, both immediately before Pentecost (Acts 1:12-26; 2:1), and after (Acts 2:42-47; 4:23-37; 5:12-14; 12:12-17; 1 Cor. 5:4; 11:17-18,20,33-34; 14:23,26; Jas. 2:2), the believers assembled for teaching, for fellowship, to break bread, to pray and to discipline one another. Indeed, they devoted themselves to church life, ‘they continued steadfastly’ in it.

Today, many have turned this upside down: they strain every nerve to get the world in (to meetings – and more). Yet Jesus plainly commanded us to go out (Mark 16:15-16; Matt. 28:19-20; Acts 1:8), not to try to get pagans in. And Acts certainly confirms that the first believers saw it that way. This does not mean we do not preach the gospel in the *ekklēsia*. This does not mean that we do not address unbelievers when discoursing in the *ekklēsia*. Here are eight reasons for doing it: 1. Specially designed meetings, free from all the trappings of ‘church’, are a way of reaching the ungodly. See my *Gadfly*. 2. When we preach, we must address the congregation as though there might be unconverted people present. Who knows? 3. God only knows who the true converts are; only he can read the heart (2 Tim. 2:19; see also John 10:14; 1 Cor. 8:3; Gal. 4:9). So we must preach, erring, in this matter, on the side of allowing that unbelievers might be present. And it is almost certain that Christendom ‘Christians’ will be in the congregation. 4. The gospel, when it is truly preached, including the giving of clear warnings, invitations, commands, exhortations to repent and come to Christ, accompanied by the warmest of encouragements and promises, is, in itself, a means of assurance, edification, progressive sanctification and comfort for believers, and a spur to their worship. 5. The unconverted children of believers will be present. They need to be called to Christ. 6. There is an educational, instructional, aspect to such preaching. As they hear the preacher truly preaching Christ, believers will themselves be helped and encouraged to go and do likewise in their families, among their friends and acquaintances, and in their work place. 7. It will encourage believers to know what to expect if they bring an interested unconverted person to hear the preacher, or if any unbeliever should happen to wander in. 8. The full explanation and application of any passage of Scripture demands it. In other words, if the preacher really is preaching, he must preach the gospel.

A Stated Day

They knew that Christ had promised his presence where two or three of his people were assembled (Matt. 18:20). Did not Paul refer to this in 1 Corinthians 5:4? Christ's promise in Matthew 18:20 does not refer exclusively to gatherings, of course; wherever (and not only in what might be called 'official' meetings) two or three saints assemble, Christ is there. True. But the immediately preceding context of the promise is very much to do with church life and with meetings (Matt. 18:15-20, especially verse 17). There are some things in the spiritual life which cannot be experienced on an individual basis: the Lord's supper (1 Cor. 10:16-17; 11:17-18) and full-scale discipline (Matt. 18:15-20; 1 Cor. 5: 4-13), for instance. This is merely to state the obvious.⁴ Christianity (*ekklēsia* life) is a corporate as well as an individual experience. Meetings are essential. Not that they constitute the totality of experience – far from it – but to call them 'important' is a truism. Without them, there would be no church!

Now – to state the obvious – a meeting of any group or body of people needs an agreement between the participants as to when and where it will take place, an agreement which is publicised among them. A meeting of the church is no exception. In particular, this elementary truth applies to the meetings of the first churches recorded in Scripture. It is too much to believe that they were *ad hoc* assemblies. The churches must have met on a stated basis for some of their meetings at least. Indeed, by the very nature of the business transacted at their gatherings, this would have been an essential requirement. For instance, if 1 Corinthians 11:33 records a spontaneous gathering of saints, and if, nevertheless, the church still obeyed Paul's command in the verse, then those who arrived first must have had a very long wait until all the others *just happened* to arrive! No, Paul's command can only be understood on the premise that the

⁴ Most of the apostolic letters are addressed to churches, not individuals. The 'you' in those letters should be thought of in the plural far more often than it is.

A Stated Day

meeting was prearranged – as to day, hour and place. I allow, of course, that some meetings were *ad hoc* – occasional or spontaneous gatherings confined either to the immediate family or a few friends. But arranged church gatherings were clearly distinguished from this (1 Cor. 11:22; 14:19,34-35).⁵ They ‘would come together... come together as a church... in one place’ (1 Cor. 11:17-18,20), and they would do so in order to enjoy church life.

In their heightened sense of joy at the start, the Jerusalem church met daily (Acts 2:46). But, it seems to me, this was extraordinary, as the context (Acts 2:43-47) appears to indicate. I do not see that this militates against the ‘ordinary’; namely, the saints having stated and settled times for their gatherings, to express their worship, to pray, to teach, to break bread, to discipline, and so on.

Not only was assembly a delightful experience for the saints, but it was a time which was vital for their spiritual growth – both as individuals and as a body. So much so, it might have been expected that the early church would have never known any dissension over the matter of assembly, no tendency to grow lax or give up attendance. But this is far from the case.

We can generalise the point. As we all know, it is very easy to grow cold (Rev. 2:4-5), become slack, backslide, drift, become casual, dull in spirit, and act in a carnal way (1 Cor. 3:1ff; Heb. 5:11-14), and to let our privileges slip away – through neglect – like water through a sieve or through the fingers (Heb. 2:1-4). We need constant reminders. Look how often the New Testament writers engage in it, how often they challenge us and stir us up, how often we are told to ‘remember’, how often they reprove the sin of forgetfulness, and so on (John 14:26; 15:20; 1 Cor. 11:24-25; Col. 4:18; 1 Tim. 4:6; 2 Tim. 1:6; 2:8; 3:6; Heb. 6:1-12; 10:32; 13:7; Jas.

⁵ New Testament churches (at least, after Acts 7), met in private houses which were small. But this is the point: they met as churches; the meeting room just happened to be in a house (Rom. 16:5,23; Col. 4:15; Philem. 2). See my *Gadfly*.

A Stated Day

1:24; 1 Pet. 1:13ff ; 2 Pet. 1:12-13; 3:1; Jude 5; Rev. 2:5). And it is not only *us* – all these verses were written to the saints of the early churches! *They* found spiritual life something *they* had to work at. *They* did not find individual and corporate growth as ‘easy as falling off a log’. The many references to which I have alluded prove it.

As far as church meetings go, we know there was a tendency for some believers in New Testament times to give up attendance. We learn this from Hebrews 10:23-25:

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the day approaching.

I say again, this sort of passage would not have been written unless some believers had begun to show a tendency to forsake church assemblies. Indeed, the writer to the Hebrews told his readers: do not stay away, ‘*as is the manner of some*’. From this we may properly deduce that the New Testament churches did not regard attendance as a matter of personal preference. It was compulsory for the saints. It was not an option or luxury. It was a necessity. It was regarded as both a duty and a privilege. It was not left to the predilection of the individual. It was a question of commitment and obedience to an apostolic command, and, as such, subject to discipline, not optional. It was not a private matter. It was public – something which concerned the whole church, on a regular, stated basis.⁶

⁶ Obviously, unavoidable absence is ‘unavoidable’. What constitutes ‘unavoidable’ is, of course, open to interpretation! Speaking of my time as an elder, a phone call (or whatever) to explain would set my mind (and heart) at rest. In the new covenant, it is, it goes without saying, a question of the heart. When a young mother (a newly-professed believer, one who until then had had little understanding of how to discipline her children and run a home), asked to join us, and said how she might not always be able

A Stated Day

As John Fellows wrote, rightly spiritualising the language of the old covenant:

*Dear friends, as you have owned
The Saviour for your Lord,
And to his people joined yourselves,
According to his word –*

*In Zion you must dwell,
Her altar ne'er forsake;
Must come to all her solemn feasts,
And all her joys partake.*

*She must employ your thoughts,
And your unceasing care;
Her welfare be your constant wish,
And her increase your prayer.*

*With humbleness of mind,
Amongst her sons rejoice;
A meek and quiet spirit is,
With God, of highest price.*

*Never offend or grieve
Your brethren in the way;
But shun the dark abodes of strife,
Like children of the day.*

*Highly in love esteem
Your elders⁷ in the Lord;
They⁸ break the bread of life to you,
And labour in the Lord.*

Take Hebrews 10:25. Unless there had been a stated time and place for meeting, all discipline, all semblance of order over this matter, would have broken down. Above all, the writer to the Hebrews would have been unable to command – yes, command, not merely urge – his readers not to forsake

to come midweek, I immediately replied, reassuring her, that as long as we knew she wanted to be there, all would be well.

⁷ Original had 'pastor'.

⁸ Fellows, of course, had 'he' because he was thinking of a single 'pastor'. In using 'elders' instead of 'pastor', I have had to make this pronoun plural.

A Stated Day

meeting with their fellow-saints. Nor would the churches have had any way of judging whether or not members were obeying the command. How could they have exhorted each other not to give up the assembly, but keep on attending, if they did not know when they were supposed to be there? Not only is a stated time implied, it is simply a matter of commonsense that this time and day must have been fixed. It was a *practical necessity*. At this stage, I am not saying that the day in question was always the same, but I am saying that, at the very least, the next meeting must have been agreed on. Furthermore, it seems to me that this almost certainly would have been the same day each week.

Think! How would you manage, reader, if there were no regular meeting-day for your church? Or no arranged day and time for the next meeting? How could you plan your life? How would you know if other members were unavoidably absent or were breaking the command of Hebrews 10:25? How could you exhort them to attend? Assembly life must have been habitual, and regular.

If not, assemblies would rapidly wither, peter out, decay and die. How easy it is to treat a church meeting – and what takes place there – with a casual spirit, even when it is fixed and stated, when it is a matter of church discipline, and when the members exhort each other to attend. How much easier it is to drift away if these ingredients of biblical church life are missing.⁹

As John Leland put it:

The history and precepts of the New Testament, with a bold front declare that *ekklēsia* life,¹⁰ in all its parts, cannot be performed without a public assemblage. Days must, therefore, be appointed, either stated and perpetual, or occasional and contingent.¹¹ And these days must be

⁹ Ask any elder who has tried to exercise any discipline in this area – however lovingly or mildly attempted!

¹⁰ Leland had ‘the Christian religion’.

¹¹ That is, subject to chance.

A Stated Day

appointed by God, by magistrates, or by a mutual agreement of those who assemble together.¹²

Contrary to many Reformed teachers and Confessions, talk of ‘magistrates’ in this context is utterly out of the question in the days of the new covenant. So I submit that the case is made: the New Testament churches met for the expression and cultivation of their mutual spiritual life, and they had a stated day for it. At this stage, I am not saying that that day was the same every time; just that it was fixed. But I will now seek to show that the stated day on which they assembled was the first day of the week.

¹² ‘Extracts from an Essay on the Sabbath’, published in 1828, in *The Writings of the Late Elder John Leland*.