

Wholly Assembled
By Pastor Mark Bahr

We begin with John 11:49-53:

⁴⁹ But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, 'You know nothing at all. ⁵⁰ Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish.' ⁵¹ He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, ⁵² and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad. ⁵³ So from that day on they made plans to put him to death."

We see in this passage that Caiaphas, in responding to the concerns of his Sanhedrin colleagues who were concerned about Jesus being an excuse for Rome to crush them, suggested that Jesus simply die instead of the people. Little did he know, he was making a prophetic utterance.

The author of the gospel interprets, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the statement of the high priest in a very unique way. He understands that statement of the High Priest, which was given as a reason to justify the persecution of and intentional execution of Jesus, as a prophetic statement that declares the reason for which Jesus came to die. Jesus came to die in order to gather a people. This people will include not only the nations but all of God's people. It is inclusive of Jews and gentiles. This statement by Caiaphas, taken in its context, is one in which he is seeking Christ to die *instead* of the people so that the nation shall live. We see, then, that Caiaphas clearly intended Christ to die in place of the people. John makes clear that this death, which will be in place of not only the nations, but of all the dispersion of God's people, will be for the purpose of gathering together God's people into one assembly.

This statement gives us a very unique picture into the elective purposes of God. While election is not clearly in view here, this must be read in light of the rest of

the message of the Johannine gospel. The Johannine gospel makes clear that God has chosen a people. Those who come to Him to Jesus come to Him because God has given them to His son (Jn. 6:46). Additionally, we see, in a preceding pericope, that Jesus speaks of His death in terms of being for His sheep. Therefore, this statement needs to be read in light of God's elective purposes. God sent his Son to die in order to gather together those whom He has chosen.

We might think of this in strictly Jewish terms, i.e. that Jesus came to restore the 12 tribes through his death to their rightful place. While Caiaphas was no doubt seeking to rescue and save the nation of Israel, John's language is clearly broader. After all, he says that this was a prophecy that includes two groups that are connected by a "not only." The Johannine understanding of this group is much broader than ethnic lineage. This group would have to be understood as those people whom Christ died for in John 10:11. This however, includes not only the sheep that are present (mostly those of Jewish descent), but also those in 10:16. This is likely a reference to not only place but also time. Jesus' people that God will gather include both Jew and Gentile. This people, while composed of those who are elect, are manifested as those who "receive" the Word spoken of in John 1. It is not those who have the right blood line that compose the children of God whom He gathers together, but it is those who receive the Son of God.

Therefore, we can summarise that what John is saying here is this: God has elected a people composed of both Jew and Gentile. He desires to gather them into one assembly. His Son will die instead of them in order to effect that gathering.

Now, precisely what does it mean that God wants to gather a people into an assembly. Some might say that this is a strictly eschatological term and has no bearing for how we view anything in the present age. However, D. A. Carson counters:

...the real children of God are those who receive the incarnate Word and believe in his name (1:12, 13), and if they are dispersed in the world (*cf.* 1 Pet. 1:1) they will be gathered not only at the parousia, but into the one church, the community of the Messiah (*to bring them together and make them one* here seems to refer to the immediate effects of Jesus' death; *cf.* also 17:21)¹

Notice, that on John 17, Jesus prays for His people. He prays for his disciples, and he prays for those disciples that are yet to come. Additionally, he prays that they would be one. This would lend support to the idea that this gathering of God's people into one assembly, while ultimately eschatological, is one that is manifested in the present age. We see the eschatological element in another Johannine work: the Revelation of Jesus to John. There we see, in a number of occasions, a grand assembly of people from every walk of life singing praises and glory to the Lamb of God!!!

The point of this is that the people of God can be defined, fundamentally, and a universal assembly of those people whom God has chosen and redeemed in the person of Jesus Christ and gathered into that one assembly. We know this as the church.

The Greek verb used for gather, in this context is *συνάγω*. It is the same root from which we get the English word Synagogue. The Synagogue is fundamentally a gathering of people. In the Septuagint, *συνάγω* is frequently the word used to translate the Hebrew verb *לָקַח* (to assemble). However, more frequently in the Septuagint, when a noun idea is needed, the Hebrew root is used, but more often than not, the Greek word *ἐκκλησία* is used to translate the idea. The same holds true, generally in the New

¹ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 422-23.

Testament.² Ἐκκλησία, with the semantic domain that it is a part of, does not carry a formal verb form. It would seem to follow, then, that the basic idea is that Jesus' death creates an ἐκκλησία.

In the Septuagint, this term is typically used to refer to the purposeful assemblies of God's people. One of the first uses is in Deuteronomy 18:15-16 in which it is said, "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen—¹⁶ just as you desired of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the **assembly**, when you said, 'Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God or see this great fire any more, lest I die.'"³ The same word is used when people are considered ineligible to partake in temple worship or in the festivals. Deuteronomy 23:3 says, "No Ammonite or Moabite may enter the assembly of the Lord. Even to the tenth generation, none of them may enter the assembly of the Lord forever..."⁴ Additionally, the Psalms are filled with references to the ἐκκλησία like what is in Psalm 21:23, "I will declare with great detail your name to my brothers, in the midst of the **assembly** I will remember you." So, we see that an idea that the purposeful gathering of God's people in the Old Testament is described, in the LXX, as ἡ ἐκκλησία.

The basic way this word has been translated throughout Christian history has been varied. The most common way is that of "church." However, in the Old Testament, it most often means "assembly." While the components of the word are from ἐκ and

² However, the exception is when the Jewish assembly place known as the synagogue is being spoken of. In that case, it may actually be referring to the building itself and not the assembly as the temple referred to the edifice and not those who assembled there. Additionally, the fact that the early Christians chose to use the term ἐκκλησία to refer to the communities of faith instead of συναγωγή indicates that this is likely the case.

³ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Dt 18:15–16.

⁴ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Dt 23:3.

κλήσις, which are most often translated "out of" or "from" and "calling" respectively, the word is not necessarily to be translated or understood as "called out ones." The basic idea is that of an assembly.

As an interesting historical note, while the King James Bible was being translated, the translators argued among themselves as to whether ἐκκλησία should be translated as "church" or as "assembly" or "congregation." The weight was on the side of those who wanted to translate it to a more concrete idea instead of "church." However, as King James wanted to be the head of the church in England, he saw the perils to his own position in translating it as "assembly."

This word, as most of us know, is used in the New Testament for another gathering: the gathering of the God's people who are in Jesus Christ. It has a number of ways being expressed. Ἐκκλησία was mentioned by Jesus before any of the epistles were written.⁵ The congregation is expressed as both a universal time-transcendent entity as well as a time-bound and localised assembly in Matthew. In Matthew 16:18, in response to the confession of Peter, Jesus says that "upon this rock⁶ I will build my church (ἐκκλησία) and the gates of Hell will not stand against it." The language here does not lend itself to this being a reference to a specific congregation bound to a certain time and place. This is in all likelihood a reference to His universal church. However, in Matthew 18, in dealing with sin against one another, Jesus gives instruction for discipline. The final stage involves "tell the church (ἐκκλησία)." Here, this is difficult to read in the

⁵ While Matthew was written after some of the epistles, and likely Mark, they are recordings of the words of Jesus which predate any of the epistles. Additionally, the gospels were written after churches had been established and were likely, at least in part, instructional tools. They give us a glimpse into the apostolic ecclesiology.

⁶ Likely referring to the confession Peter made.

same way as in Matthew 16. This is in all likelihood making reference to a specific group of people that compose such a congregation.

In the New Testament epistles, where the word occurs the most in the New Testament, there is an interesting use of the word involving the singularity or plurality of it. It is expressed in terms of both a singularity and as a plurality. Ephesians 3:20-21 is one of those instances where it occurs in the singular. "Now to the one who is able to do all things above and beyond whatever we might ask or think in accordance with the power that is working in us. to him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus into all the generations of the ages of the ages, amen."⁷ Here we see a very unique use of this ἐκκλησία. The assembly is spoken of in singular terms and exists for the glory of God. That glory of God in the church (and of course, in Christ Jesus) is not limited to a time or a place. This is an assembly or congregation that transcends time and place. It is a universal assembly. It is this assembly of which our passage in John was speaking of earlier. This is the assembly that is composed of all of God's people of all times and that we see singing praises to the triune God in the opening chapters of the Revelation.

However, as I mentioned, there is a multitude of uses of this word in both the plural and the singular. We see it used in the plural in Paul's opening words to the Galatians. He writes "to the assemblies of Galatia." Galatia was not a city, but a very large region.⁸ He refers not to the "assembly" of Galatia but to the "congregations" of Galatia. Additionally, when writing to the Christians who met in a given locality, he did not refer to them in the plural but in the singular. In the opening words to both letters to the Thessalonians, Paul writes to the "congregation of the Thessalonians." What we are

⁷ Translation mine

⁸ Roughly the area that is now known as Turkey

seeing in passages like these is the New Testament understanding of the visible manifestation, in this age, of that universal body that is spoken of Ephesians 3:21. We see that it is fundamentally an assembly of Christians from a given locality. These Christians met together and had elders and deacons as their officers (Philippians 1:1). Each of these assemblies is to be a visible manifestation of that universal assembly that God is gathering together from all walks of life.

We've seen, then, that the basic nature of the visible manifestation of this grand congregation of God's people is that of what we call the local church or the local congregation. These assemblies are not marked primarily by buildings but by who makes them up and the basis of their assembly. It is those who have received Jesus Christ who congregate that are themselves a local church.⁹

One of the questions that is a hot-button issue in New Testament scholarship these days has to do with what the early assemblies patterned themselves after. There are a number of different options that were all referred to as ἐκκλησία when they gathered. There was the Roman Imperial Senate, the synagogue, and the voluntary association. We can see, from Acts, that the early church in Jerusalem was likely highly influenced by the synagogue. However, certain activities that occurred during the assembly were more reflective of the Voluntary Associations characteristic of the Roman world. These associations gathered together to eat and often had religious character to them. Some were even anti-imperial in nature.¹⁰ These voluntary associations provided burial for their members, they would come to the aid of members in need, and even sacrifice their

⁹ As mentioned earlier, this also presupposes based on Philippians, a leadership structure of elders and deacons. While not all traditions have such terminology or structure, the functions are usually there.

¹⁰ It is for this reason that the Roman Empire attempted, unsuccessfully, to have the voluntary associations outlawed.

own livelihood to aid those in need. They had a strong sense of group identity.¹¹ We can see many parallels to the local ἐκκλησία of Christ in these groups.¹²

Regardless of what they were patterned after, a fundamental mark of all of the above groups is that as an assembly, they purposefully assembled together. The Roman Senate, the synagogues, and the voluntary associations. A fundamental requirement, while it would seem to state the obvious, of a congregation is that it congregates together!!!¹³ The question then becomes, what is it for a congregation to gather and what does it look like? That is exactly what we are aiming to work toward in this conference. We see in the early church there was a pattern of gathering. In Acts 2:42, our theme scripture, we see a number of activities that the early Christians were committed to.¹⁴ Our question, then, for this conference is "What should a church do when she gathers?" in order that we might be wholly assembled.

Acts 2:42 says that those early Christians were devoted "the breaking of the bread and to the prayers, to the teaching of the apostles and to the fellowship." These are four fundamental activities that we, I posit, ought to pattern in our assembling of ourselves together. Without stealing the thunder of any of those who will be speaking, I'll proceed to summarise these.

¹¹ This group identity is characteristic of the ancient world. People were defined by their associations with family, community, and their attributed status in those groups. Deviating from group norms was an offense of the first degree in many circles.

¹² We see this in their strong devotion to one another, the common meals, the burial practices, and the strong sense of group identity exhibited by early Christianity.

¹³ Compare this to Hebrews 10:19-25 where a series of exhortations are given. The last exhortation is to "consider how we might stir one another up to love and good works, not neglecting the gathering of ourselves..." The author of Hebrews did not see room for a church that did not gather together!! Additionally, we see in Acts 20 Paul recounting "when we met on the first day of the week to break bread" presupposes a pattern of gathering together.

¹⁴ One can take this as being limited to the just that local assembly or as a summary statement for the pattern of churches over a period of years.

The Breaking of the Bread is, in all likelihood, making reference to the acts of remembering the death of our Lord Jesus Christ in broken bread and poured out wine. While it may have been accompanied by a meal, this is not mere reference to having fellowship over food together. That would fall under one of the other categories! As referenced earlier, Paul states that he and others were gathered on the first day of the week for the purpose of the breaking of the bread. This would indicate that the celebration of what we call the Lord's Supper was a pivotal part of their assembly. What is it about the Lord's Supper that is so important? First, we remember the death of Jesus until He comes. It is a dramatisation of the Gospel for the people of God so that we will remember from whence comes our confidence and for what we hope! It is also, from 1 Corinthians 10, a communion with the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.¹⁵ As such, we might say that the meal is a source of nourishment for the believer.

The Prayers of the people of God, in this context, is referring to the people of God praying together in unison and agreement. Prayer is a means by which the people of God commune with God and seek that He would advance the Gospel and aid His people as we seek those ends. We can see this demonstrated throughout the book of Acts. Shortly after being beaten and rebuked for preaching Christ and being conduits of the power of God, Peter and John joined in prayer with the rest of their band of laborers in Acts 4. They prayed that God would move, grant them boldness, and testify to the authenticity of the Gospel with works of power. God answered and they went out with

¹⁵ Paul uses the fact that the cup and the bread are a participation in the blood and body of Christ to show that participation with idols is participation with the demons behind them. While we may be eating what is merely bread and drinking what is merely wine (or grape juice), we are experiencing real participation with the body and blood of Christ in the same way that an idol worshipper experiences real participation with the demons behind those idols when they engage in idolatrous practices.

boldness. Prayer takes the form of voiced prayer by individuals, corporate prayer (either in unison or each praying), and corporate prayer through singing!

Another one of those elements is the teaching of the apostles. They were devoted to them. This likely, at least in the beginning, took the form of the apostles passing on their instruction, which were steeped in the teaching and memoirs of Jesus, to the assemblies. As time passed, this mantle was passed on to others.¹⁶ In the letters of the apostles, we can see these in not only didactic form but in hymnic form. For example, Colossians 1:13-20 is widely regarded as being a hymn familiar to the early churches. Many scholars consider Ephesians 1:3-13 to be a form of hymn. The teaching of the apostles need not begin and end with the activity we know as preaching. Colossians 3:16 and Ephesians 5:19 tell us that we exhort one another by means of singing. Our gatherings must be steeped in the teaching of the apostles. The teaching of the apostles is now found in the scriptures. The reading, publicly, of the scriptures is a vital means of carrying out this activity. If we are to be true assemblies, we must engage in teaching, practices, ethics, and proclamation that are rooted in the teaching of the apostles.

Lastly, they were devoted to the fellowship. This is one of, in my opinion, the least understood concepts in Christianity. This term is often used when "hanging out" is more what is meant. Fellowship, that is being spoken of here, is informed by what we see in what follows in Acts 2 and in Acts 4:32-37. We see a common bond such that they were devoted to one another. They had been integrated into a new family: the family of God. As such, they sought the good of each other, provided for one another, and lived

¹⁶ 2 Timothy 2:1-2

together in the fear of God. Fellowship is not merely "hanging out". Nor is it merely instances of fellowship. It is an attitude and activity that manifests itself in instances of devotion to one another and spending time laboring together in Christ. We are called assemblies for a reason, we are groups of people who need each other. We are groups of people who have the common bond of Christ and are all sons of the Father. We are family!! That is fellowship, and that is why we must be devoted to it.

The people of God are indeed a grand gathering of people that transcends time and place. Yet this gathering manifests itself in terms of local gatherings (or assemblies, or congregations). We call these gatherings of people, quite frequently, churches. As assemblies, we need to assemble!! Our assemblies need to be purposeful and guided by what we see in the scriptures. It is only then that we will be "wholly assembled."