

"When we Come Together"

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1 Corinthians 11:17-18

"Now in this that I declare unto you I praise you not, that ye come together not for the better, but for the worse. For first of all, when ye come together in the church, I hear that there be divisions among you; and I partly believe it." KJV

Contrary to our modernized culture, the assembly of believers is paramount to healthy and vital Christendom. The neglect of the local church assembly is to the true believer, the catalyst of spiritual declension. One of the maladies we face in westernized Christianity is the individualistic mindsets we have, which are greatly in contrast to New Testament Christian living.

The concept of the body of Christ is a plurality of members working together in harmonious rhythm, being multiple in diversity, yet, synchronized in purpose and trajectory. The chief threat to effective local church ministry is its membership embracing individualistic ideologies. It is wholly possible for a local church to meet weekly under the same roof, being together locally, but divided actually.

This phenomenon is destructive to the divine purpose for the local church, and it renders the church inert; or unproductive. For this malady to be overcome in western Christianity, we must abandon the mindsets they have permeated our culture, and allow our minds to be renewed according to the Word of God.

Today I want to take a short time and give some biblical principles regarding the local Church and the membership thereof. These principles are vital principles, if Pryor Creek Community Church is to operate within purposes for which she was created. In the Apostle Paul's address to the Corinthian church he identifies their coming together as amiss. They were together, but not for the better, but for the worse. They were divided, meaning they were not together but apart, detached in their purpose; albeit together in attendance.

Today's message is a solemn warning to the membership of this local church, lest we too fall after their example of coming together for the worse.

- Each true believer has been given a multiplicity of spiritual gifts to be exercised selflessly for the good of the whole body.

1 Corinthians 12:7-8

"Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good." NIV

This word manifestation simply means bestowment. Literally this is saying the Spirit of God bestows spiritual gifts for the good of the body; not the individual. Several years ago I preached a sermon titled "neglect not the gift" that addressed the devilish use of gifts given for the body for selfish purposes. We must understand a simple but profound truth; our place in the body of Christ is not centered around our well-being and good, but expressly for the glory of God. This occurs as the individual members, lose their individual world view to attain a corporate world-view, hence, accomplishing the purposes of God as a body and not an individual.

Great accomplishments in the Kingdom of God are not wrought by individualistic hero Christians; but by a body of believers that have been unified through the work of the Cross in the denouncement of their individual status and distinctness of gifting. If our divine purpose, (and we have one), is to ever be pursued and attained, we must individually go to the Cross of Jesus Christ whereby we have our individual identities crucified, our individual gifts that we indulge ourselves upon put to death, and whereby we are resurrected into one body for one purpose.

1 Corinthians 12:11-12

"But all these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as he will. For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ." KJV

A question that arises is this: "could the body of Christ be affected in its divinely ascribed purpose, if its membership misuses or fails to exercise their gifting?" This is a very valid question, because it reveals the responsibility of the believer regarding their divine gifting, and the exercise thereof, in the apprehension of the purpose of the local church.

This directly ties in to our foundational text; "...that ye come together not for the better, but for the worse. For first of all, when ye come together in the church, I hear that there be divisions among you;..." Coming together biblically should be our hearts desire, knowing that it glorifies our God. Coming together biblically presupposes each member of the assembly is conscious or aware that

they have divinely ascribed gifts that are imperative to church life and vitality. Moreover, the member acknowledges that he or she is necessary to the body; their aim or motive is not what they can get from the body, but what God has given as a gift, that they may contribute, or give to the body for its vitality, and to assist her in her royal mission upon earth.

When the Apostle aims at those coming together for the worse, he is capitalizing upon the idealism being practiced within the corporate sphere whereby the assembly was a frolic of individuals operating with the motive of personal gain in contrast to personal surrender for the common good. If you understand the context of this text, the Corinthians were assembling to partake of the Lord's Supper but out of individualistic and temporal motives; not for the common good. They were attending together, but for personal gain, not divine purpose. They bypassed their homes where they should have eaten their meals, and began plagiarizing upon the church and its holy sacraments to meet their innate needs.

In short, these Corinthian believers were using the assembly for the benefits it offered to them, and not for the high call of Christ to lay down our lives, and individual rights, that we might serve selflessly for the common good. Their minds were upon the bread and wine offered, but not upon corporate sharing of the "common cup and bread" as an eternal monument of Christ's provision to His body, but upon the gluttonous indulgence of the temporal tokens.

We come together for the worse when our hearts are filled with self-oriented agendas regarding the assembly. Did the music satisfy me? Did the sermon incite my emotions and elevate my mood? Were the people friendly to me, and satisfy my social needs? Was I appropriately complimented and encouraged to be my all? Were my children applauded and cherished more than others? Was this coming together for my betterment?

Oh beloved, this is amiss, wicked, devilish, and sensual. It does not come down from the Father of Lights in Whom there is no variableness, nor shadow of turning. Yet, this mood, or idealism has permeated and overtaken the core-belief of western Christendom. It is meeting but not for the better, but for the worse. The division is not in physical relation, but in spiritual relation. The proximity physically is close, but spiritually it is divided and separate. A group of individuals in the same room does not constitute being together.

When that group of individuals are un-united in the biblical mandate to come together preferring one another, to exercise God given spiritual gifts and graces for the common good, and to lay our lives down for one another, we are coming together for the worse.

When the membership of the local assembly opts out of the appointed time to assemble it affects the whole body. If we look through biblical lenses and not individualistic lenses we see this truism. I am only one small part of the local assembly or church. Yet, what would happen if I followed the example of some of the members of this local church and became spasmodic in the coming together of the elect? If I showed up once a week or two, and missed the midweek services because it wasn't convenient for me, what would happen to the divine purpose of this local church? It would be amiss wouldn't it? Could we attain our heavenly goal?

Yet, our Roman Catholic mindsets have hyper-exalted one gift above the others whereby we see the Pastoral gift is preeminent and non-negotiable regarding faithfulness, commitment, and excellence, but not the gifts given by the Holy Spirit to each and every member of the body; including yours.

This is the very cardinal sin that the Apostle Paul was addressing to Corinth. It has repackaged and called itself modernism, and it is within the church today; even here at Pryor Creek Community Church.

1 Corinthians 12:21-22

"And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you. Nay, much more those members of the body, which seem to be more feeble, are necessary:" KJV

The Church at Corinth was multilpicious in gifting but amiss in the motive and application of these gifts. The eye felt that it did not need the hand, and the head did not feel that the feet were necessary. Each believer was recluse in their gift, self-absorbed with the self-benefit it yielded to them personally. The eye did not see the need for the hand simply because the eye was looking at itself and not at the whole of the body and its necessity therein. The head did not feel the need for the feet, for it was wholly admirable of its own beauty and not conscious of the whole body and forward momentum necessitates feet to carry it forward.

The summation of the message is that the membership and its spiritual gifts were inordinately focused upon the beauty and profit of their own gift - and not the purpose of the gift which is to bring about a common good and well-being to the church in its divine purpose and calling.

Is not thus today? When we elect to neglect the coming together of God's people are we not depriving Christ's church of necessary gifts and graces for her well-being, as well as her divine purpose? Moreover, when we do come together physically, are we not doing injustice and harm to the church's purpose when we neglect those gifts given to the church?

Beloved, when we meet together it is a time for us to be selfless in our motive, and administration. We must crucify the idealism that pursues what benefits me directly. We must by God's power, facilitate the idealism that relentlessly gives for the good of others without expectation of any favors in return. Every member of this body that has been saved by the power of God through

regeneration has been given gifts to be exercised in this local church. It is absolutely and irrevocably united with the wellbeing and the heavenly purpose for this local assembly.

These spiritual gifts have practical manifestations and irreplaceable values. They are not lofty spiritual themes, but practical workings in the church for its vitality and purpose. These are gifts of exhorting, administration, teaching, mercy, ruling (oversight), and other multilicious gifts. They are spiritual gifts, dealing with spiritual needs, and often times by very ordinary applications. By this I mean the application of these gifts are not as witnessed in Charismania circles, where many are false in the application, hyper-spiritualizing the application in bizarre and unusual ways, usually to draw attention to their spirituality. This is not what we are speaking of beloved.

Spiritual gifts manifest in very practical ways. The body of Christ is a spiritual body, but it consists of human beings made of flesh and blood. Spiritual gifts are spiritual gifts, but they manifest in very ordinary application; not bizarre. Most often, the spiritual gift being applied goes unnoticed because of the ordinary application of it; albeit it is heavenly wrought but earthly applicable.

A true spiritual gift never draws attention to itself; it always applies itself in humility as a servant to the lacks and needs of Christ's body. Again, most often it is not discerned as a spiritual gift due to the ordinary application.

It is not my intention to get into the dynamics of spiritual gifts, but I feel this message necessitates these truths. In closing beloved, when we come together, we must be biblical; always. We must by the Cross of Christ, crucify our selfish ambition, or self-seeking agendas, and put the needs of the Lord's precious body before our own. This indeed glorifies God.

Our retraction from the coming together is altogether self-encompassed, self-engrossed, and it stifles the vitality of the Lord's church. Moreover, when we come together with amiss motives, we also stifle the momentum of the church in its heavenly purpose. We may feel our retraction from, or isolation is harmless to all except us, but this is inaccurate. Both the individual member and the corporate whole are affected.

The coming together of God's people is a symphonic, and harmonious, exercising of self-denouncement, and a humble yielding to the operation of God, through His gifts, for the good of the entirety of the body of believers. This is the rule, as often as we come together.

If Pryor Creek Community Church is to be the effective church we have been purposed to be, we must adopt these biblical principles into our practical application and never refrain from them. It is absolutely imperative.

1 Peter 5:8-9

"Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour : whom resist stedfast in the faith, knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the world." KJV

One of the great pitfalls of modern Christianity, even amongst us locally, is our failure to discern the rabid prowess of our adversary. We are living in a dispensation whereby our adversary is active and purposed to disrupt the harmonious unification of the saints of God. We can chant greater is He that is in me than he that is in the world until we become faint with exhaustion but it will not produce any victory over the adversary as long as we are out of sync with one another and the spirit of unity.

In these crucial times that we are living in, the adversary is purposed to divide the body of Christ by his cunning, and thereby strip them of their unity and consequently their power. The prophet Daniel said:

Daniel 7:25

"And he shall speak great words against the most High, and shall wear out the saints of the most High, and think to change times and laws: and they shall be given into his hand until a time and times and the dividing of time." KJV

The Greek for "wear out" gives the idea of wearing down. I may be inaccurate in my assessment, but it appears to me that the adversary wears down the body of Christ by separating them, or disrupting their unity, and thereby burdens each believer to exist in solitariness, or isolation, and individualism. Hence, unnecessary burdens befall individuals that were purposed to be easily born by the church as a unified body.

This carrying of burdens individually that were purposed to be shared amongst us, wears out the individual and renders them unable to endure. The reason I am mention this is that this is the chief tactic of our adversary; to separate and segregate us to disrupt the power of unity. One of the chief ways he achieves this by manipulating circumstances (he is the prince of the power of the air); to cause members of the body to become "disjointed" one with another.

Offense is the arch-enemy of unity. All of us would like to think that we are too spiritually mature to be offended at our brother/sister, but beloved, this is not an accurate assessment. We must be wise as a serpent, but harmless as a dove! There is going to

manifest, if there has not already been a manifestation, whereby a situation arises that will act as a catalyst for members of the body of Christ to respond.

Most often, the situation has serious implication, and direct ties to individual members of the body of Christ. As I mentioned, the situation requires a response by individual members, but the response by Christ's precious children to the situation may not be to the approval of others; hence trouble begins to ensue.

Remember, the whole sum of the situation has been wrought by our adversary and not providential design. The sum of the situation has been staged by the enemy to cause division, and division is the catalyst of spiritual weakness and ineffectiveness. The reason I am mentioning this is that our adversary is a powerful adversary and he needs to be exposed.

If the body of Christ can remain unified through even devilish circumstances that were merely plots to divide us, we will overcome and increase in strength. Yet, if we become disjointed one with another, regarding the situation and the responses of the members of the body, we will make opportunity for the enemy to wreak havoc in devastating disruption.

As God's people, we must learn to understand the ways of our enemy, as well as his plans. Division and offense is his chief plot to gain entrance and a foothold in the body of Christ whereby he methodically begins to undermine, disrupt, and conquer our divinely wrought purposes.

If we are to overcome, we must understand his devices as the Apostle:

2 Corinthians 2:10-11

"To whom ye forgive any thing, I forgive also: for if I forgave any thing, to whom I forgave it, for your sakes forgave I it in the person of Christ; lest Satan should get an advantage of us: for we are not ignorant of his devices." KJV

Lest Satan should get an advantage? (The Greek meaning of this word 'advantage' is to have more, or a greater share; to be superior, to excel, or to surpass.) The question then is to whom does Satan gain advantage over or become superior to? It is the unforgiving brother or sister that has allowed situational challenge to become a vice of unforgiveness in the heart.

It is important that we see the context of this passage. This is an epistle that was written to the Corinthian church; the same Corinthian church the 1st epistle was written unto where the Apostle laid out the revelation of the body of Christ, its membership, and the necessity of its divine gifting.

Beloved, the chief cause of stagnant unproductive church life is offense. Satan does indeed gain advantage when the body becomes disjointed one with another; it disrupts the harmony and synchronization in their forward thrust for the glory and purposes of God.

The key to overcoming these opportunities for offense is for us to become healthier in Christ's love. For us to become more healthy in Christ's love, we must become healthier in the esteeming of one another; and more healthy by esteeming ourselves less.

Philippians 2:1-4

"If there be therefore any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any bowels and mercies, fulfill ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others." KJV

The esteeming of one another, and preferring one another, even before ourselves is the key to effective body ministry. It is not a mistake that First Corinthians thirteen is sandwiched in-between the two chapters that deal with spiritual gifts; the chapter on God's love. Love is the cohesiveness that keeps the gifts operating and the body unified and healthy.

The greatest gift each of us can excel in is the gift of humility, and lowliness of mind regarding ourselves. The church today is not tragically off balance being too humble and with such lowliness of mind that we cannot operate. No brethren, this is not the case at all. The membership of the church today is much like Corinth; we are largely out of order and amiss in many ways and in need of a perfecting of holiness in the fear of the Lord.

2 Corinthians 7:1

"Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God." KJV

The root of offense is the esteeming of one's self beyond measure; it is pride in an inconspicuous form. Often times we do not know it is within us until a situation gives us opportunity to see it manifest itself. If we by the grace of God could learn to esteem and prefer one another biblically it would be impossible to offend us. This would no doubted be revival for the church!

Forgiveness is nothing less than a change of heart regarding ourselves; not the offense itself. If our view of ourselves remains exalted, how can we get past a wound or a situation whereby we've been violated? We cannot go back and change time to avoid the event, nor can we enter the heart of the offender and remedy their wrongs. So, for us to forgive an offense, we must indeed have a change in our heart regarding ourselves.

This is imperative for you to hear beloved. Many of you are having a hard time getting past certain incidents, acts, betrayals, broken trust, circumstances, and you are trying to forgive these things; but amiss!

Oh beloved, don't you understand the scriptures?

Matthew 18:35

"So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses." KJV

For forgiveness to be true and biblical forgiveness there must be a work of grace in the heart; a change of heart. We've been wrongfully taught to forgive on the basis of the act; meaning we look to the act and attempt to forgive the person for the act. I am not saying we do not forgive the person for the act; I am saying we need to have a change in our heart regarding ourselves and our offenders.

When we begin to rightfully discern our own hearts, we find the fault most often is within us and the situation whereby we've fallen into offense was only the tool to reveal something amiss in our own hearts. The hyper-exaltation of self is the catalyst of offense and until you humble yourself and begin to esteem your brother that offended you, the act cannot be forgiven.

The parable of the unforgiving servant in 18 Matthew is really about a man with a defect in his heart; not his situation. It reveals a king that exercised unmerited compassion upon a servant debtor and a debtor servant who exercised unmerited vengeance upon a debtor.

The king who exercised compassion revealed his heart of humility, preferring the debtor. The forgiven debtor revealed his heart of pride and over-esteeming of himself when he preferred himself and not his debtor. This parable is a story of the heart; not the situation. Forgiveness is a heart issue; not a situational issue.

Albeit, there is a moral wrong often times in these situations, a heart of love and humility chooses not to respond adversely, but with grace. Grace always gives that which is not merited, that which is not deserved. We have received freely; hence, we must give freely. Brothers and sisters, we will have opportunities in this local assembly to take offense at a brother or sister or to exercise grace; giving in a moral situation that which is not deserved.

Romans 12:3

"For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith." KJV

The basis of giving underserved favor in a moral situation is the grace that has been given to us. This is exemplified in 18 Matthew; the king gave what was not deserved but the servant gave what was deserved. The king acted in grace, the servant did not.

When we come to a dilemma in the church, a situation occurs, a moral situation where wrongs have been committed, we are under obligation to exercise grace and to think soberly of ourselves; lowliness of mind. Why? Because we have been given grace freely and the recipients of free grace are morally obligated to be gracious.

Unforgiveness is the acting upon a moral situation whereby wrongs have been committed without grace. This is a heart issue beloved. Pride is a root of self-love in the heart. Meekness and lowliness of mind is a work of grace in the heart.

You may say, I have no grace to act in meekness regarding a certain situation; hence, my unforgiveness is merited. I must answer biblically, God has dealt unto every man the measure of faith; grace through faith. We've received grace and where grace is received, it is not only received in pardon but it is received in store. Simply put, if you have received grace from God in the pardon of your sins, your offenses towards God, there is grace indwelling your life (in store) to exercise regarding the offenses of others towards you. There is no excuse.

The act of God being gracious towards you acts and resides within you permanently. Remember we have not only received the grace of God, but also the God of grace. Hence, there is an abiding and continuing work of grace in our lives, if we are His. These

virtues must be acted upon and practiced in the body of Christ if we are to grow, mature, and accomplish our divine calling and purpose.

When the members of the body are harmonious one with another, we can work together in sync and progress together. This is our heavenly call. Preferring one another, serving one another, loving one another, and selflessly operating in our divine gifts for the good of one another! This is the church alive and the church effective. This is our quest.

"Joy and Gladness"

Psalms 42:1-4

As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God. My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God: when shall I come and appear before God? My tears have been my meat day and night, while they continually say unto me, where is thy God? When I remember these things, I pour out my soul in me: for I had gone with the multitude, I went with them to the house of God, with the voice of joy and praise, with a multitude that kept holyday. KJV

Often times we take for granted the most meaningful occasions, or opportunities, whereby the glorious becomes familiar, and the holy becomes common; no longer distinguished as sacred. In this short series we've been dealing with the local church; the meeting place, where and when we come together. We've talked about the imperative nature of the assembly, whereby the gifts God gives each born-again saint are operating for the common good. We've dealt with one of the chief tactics of the adversary to divide the continuity and forward momentum of the church; offense and unforgiveness.

Today I want to take a few moments to speak upon the subject of joy and gladness as an effect of our coming together. We are living in a society of schedules and appointments that are necessary for business, or culture, but are somewhat dreaded when we are truthful with our own hearts. These engagements are secular in nature, but necessary in our world of business and culture. Yet, we have a heart of drudgery regarding them for there is no joy in them.

My concern as a shepherd is that we are dragging this set of affections regarding secular interests into the realm of the sacred and holy, causing an attitude of dread or joyless commitment regarding our coming together. This mindset is unbiblical, unhealthy, and sinful if entertained. We must understand that the coming together of God's people is God's idea; hence, it must be perfect. The coming together is not man's idea; its origin is in the perfect plan of God from eternity past.

Hence, it is a joyful experience for our God when there is a consummation of His eternal plans and decrees. As Christians, the things that delight our Father's heart must delight ours as well. We must get our thinking straight regarding the local assembly, or the coming together of God's people. The chief purpose of our coming together is to glorify God. This is the pinnacle purpose of our meeting together each week on Sunday's, Wednesday's or other set apart times. I am not suggesting that it is the only purpose, but it is certainly the chief purpose.

We've Americanized and culturalized the church, seeing it as a vehicle to expedite our plans and purposes instead of humbling ourselves and coming together to expedite God's plans and purposes.

It has become a trend in our American culture to shop around for the church that meets your needs the best; most of which are carnal and self-centered. Many are looking for the best entertainment, the best of facilities, the best of service, the most pleasing to our children's appetites, etc. This idealism brings competitiveness between churches, and the one with the most service and venues wins the families and hence becomes the most successful.

Yet, amongst this madness, where are the saints of God who are not enticed by such carnal vices that have an unquenchable desire to be amongst like-minded saints, to come together in the local assembly for the glory of God - and for the common good of the saints. There are those who are not tempted or drawn away but such novice things; you are amongst them. There exists a true-breed of Christian whose delight is to live wholly for the glory of God, and not for the pleasure of temporal delights.

Being so, these Christians assemble together often, and they are joyful in their meeting together, knowing it delights their Father. The meeting together, to the true Christian, is a source of joy and delight, not of drudgery or lifeless commitment. In our opening text we see the heart of a true saint of God, delighting in the coming together of God's people.

David cried out: "my soul panteth after Thee, O God. My soul thirsteth for God, the living God." Then he begins to meditate upon his heart's longing after God and the great experiences with the God of Majesty and an interesting and key element comes into the following statement; "for I had gone with the multitude to the house of God, with a voice of joy and praise, with a multitude that kept holyday."

These times of great and overwhelming joy are distinguished and set apart times when the people of God were assembled and God was moving in great power in their midst. Keeping the holyday, the set-apart and consecrated and appointed times, for corporate worship, were joyous times, times of great praise.

These times of corporate, and solemn assembly, were times marked in David's heart as remarkable and unforgettable. My soul panteth after Thee, my soul thirsteth for God, the living God. You cannot pant after something you've never had, nor can you thirst

for what you've never experienced. David is calling to his remembrance these times where God had touched and communed with his soul in the house of God; and with a multitude that kept holyday. He cried; "when I remember these things", oh the joy, oh the blessedness, oh the delight that takes place as I enter the house of God with the multitude, keeping holyday.

It is these times being called unto remembrance that is capsulated in David's decree in Psalm 122:

Psalms 122:1

"I was glad when they said unto me, let us go into the house of the LORD." KJV

The Hebrew here means; "It made me joyful". Oh beloved, it is not out of a sense of duty that we meet on the appointed days; or holydays. The coming together of God's people is not as our secular appointments, perceived as but necessary evils. Oh beloved, God has ordained the coming together to be a joyful occasion, whereby He grants His beloved a "taste" of greater things in store and to come.

In judgment against a wayward people, or church, one of the chosen instruments of God to afflict His sinful people is to revoke the joy of the coming together. The children of Israel would assemble, but the joy they had previously experienced was stricken, and it was but a woeful experience to them.

Joel 1:14-16

"Sanctify ye a fast, call a solemn assembly, gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land into the house of the LORD your God, and cry unto the LORD, Alas for the day! for the day of the LORD is at hand, and as a destruction from the Almighty shall it come. Is not the meat cut off before our eyes, yea, joy and gladness from the house of our God?" KJV

In Matthew Henry's comments regarding this passage he cites:

(2.) Let them look into God's house, and see the effects of the judgment there; joy and gladness were cut off from the house of God. Note, The house of our God is the proper place of joy and gladness; when David goes to the altar of God, it is to God my exceeding joy; but when joy and gladness are cut off from God's house, either by corruption of holy things or the persecution of holy persons, when serious godly decays and love waxes cold, then it time to cry to the Lord, time to cry, Alas!

My point in bringing this passage before us is to show that God has ordained the coming together, the assembly, to be a joyous and glad occasion. The routine and grind mentality regarding the local church is not within the scope and plan of God; He has purposed His church's meeting to be a source of joy - divine joy!

When God has to remove this joy in His displeasure with His people, it reveals it is His delight and plan to give it to His obedient and chaste people. I truly believe we are in some measure being afflicted with this mood regarding the Assembly of God's justified people. We have allowed the mood regarding common things to creep in and to influence the hallowed things. We dread our commitments of labor, our jobs, and other common commitments. As Americans we live for the weekend, where we are free from the common commitments, and the dreading of the tasks they represent. Yet, we feel obligated to go to church: 'we're Christians and good Christians go to church' - so this same "common" mood invades the "sacred and holy" reducing it to a common dreaded event. The joy is not present, much like our laborious commitments, but we go anyway and trod through it.

Hence, we look for ways to evade our commitments from time to time because we find no joy in them. We have to go to the lake, or the creek, to find release from the burdens we find and feel regarding our religious commitments. Is this not true in some measure with us?

Many of us that are truthful will have to admit this has crept into our hearts, even unawares. We would find more delight in sleeping in and having "family time" evading the coming together, than finding our joy in what God has established to share with us His joy. I do not want this mindset and heart in me, and I know that you do not either. I want to experience joy as God has purposed, and not how this secular world has tried to impose. How can this be accomplished?

1. We must change our ideas regarding the coming together to become more biblical.
 2. We must hold fast to the truth that God has purposed our joy to be abundant and full when we come together.
 3. We must denounce the blending of the holy with the common, even in our thought processes regarding the church.
 4. We must learn that biblical art of finding joy in the giving away of that which you cannot keep.
- We must change our ideas regarding the coming together to become more biblical.

I have already mentioned much of this, but we have allowed our minds to become tainted regarding the coming together of God's people. We have lost the ability to highly value what God and His Word places great emphasis and value upon. Other hierarchy's have become established in our perception and world-views that have diminished the importance of what God has ordained. Things that this world finds fascinating and valuable have left an imprint upon our minds, hence, influencing our hearts whether mildly, or grossly. Consequently, we begin to feel a gravitational pull towards endeavors esteemed by unregenerate society. This leads to an unhealthy sharing in what this world esteems and finds valuable.

Being the human heart cannot share two thrones, throughout the course of time we find ourselves in the routine of assembling together, while our hearts loyalty is fixed upon endeavors that are applauded and celebrated by what unregenerate society is enamored by. You cannot find joy in the rhythms that are not melodious to your soul. Many professors of Christ come to the assembly in such manner; the rhythms ordained of God are not melodious any longer for a new song written by strangers has inscribed its own tune upon their hearts. This vice can only be reversed by the emphatic embrace of the biblically revealed desires and plans of God for His covenanted people.

- We must hold fast to the truth that God has purposed our joy to be abundant and full when we come together.

As believers, our foundation is the Word of God. The winds of culture can blow, and the things esteemed by the masses can shine before us, but we are not moved by them, nor do we respond to them. When God's written Word declares to us that our fount of joy is in the coming together; the assembly, we by faith abide there in genuine trust like a child. As a child of God I do not run to Egypt to fulfill my joy; but to the prescribed and written purposes of God.

I must be convinced of what God has said in His Word regarding the church, and the joys therein purposed and ordained by God Himself. Even if the voices outside are tempting me to find my joy's in other venues, I will not heed them! I am a child of God.

- We must denounce the blending of the holy with the common, even in our thought processes regarding the church.

What I am inferring is that what God has declared to be a holy or a hallowed thing we must revere it and not allow our thoughts regarding them to become common. The blending of the holy with the common does not make the common hallowed, but the hallowed common. By this I am meaning to communicate that if we allow our feelings and value of the local church to be equaled by the feelings and value we place on secular pursuits we have diminished the hallowedness of what God esteems to mere common place things; even if this takes place in the deep crevasses of our minds that are not even communicated abroad.

Numbers 18:32

"...neither shall ye pollute the holy things of the children of Israel, lest ye die."

- We must learn that biblical art of finding joy in the giving away of that which you cannot keep.

This ties in with our first message in this short series, planting our lives deep in the local church, serving one another, preferring one another, facilitating the gifts given by God for the good of others, and living our lives serving that our joy might be full.

Matthew 25:21

"His lord said unto him, well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord."

Beloved, the biblical paradigm is that our joy is complete and full when we are faithful servants. Enter into the joy of the Lord faithful servant! This is the heart, the theme, and the satisfaction of the true Christian. Esteeming our brethren, serving them with the gifts given to us by our God, and being faithful thereunto until the coming of our Lord, is to the Christian, joy unspeakable full of glory.

"Protection and Provision"

Acts 4:21-23

So when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding nothing how they might punish them, because of the people: for all men glorified God for that which was done. For the man was above forty years old, on whom this miracle of healing was shewed. And being let go, they went to their own company, and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said unto them. KJV

And when they had prayed, the place was shaken where they were assembled together; and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they spake the word of God with boldness. And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul: neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common. KJV

One of the greatest hindrances to biblical church life is the wrongful mindset regarding it. I've made mention of this vice several times already in this series of messages, but the belief system that perceives the church as an institution to serve them is the chief hindrance to the local church. With this mindset or belief system, we expect to be served instead of to serve; hence, we want all of the benefits associated with biblical church-life without the commitment, faithfulness, and self-sacrifice associated therein.

Without the proper understanding that we are to lose our lives in sacrificial, self-denial for the good of others, messages such as this one would be enticing to those who live to heap upon themselves the blessings of covenant while they live outside the scope of covenant. Beloved, there are multilpicious blessings within covenant life; biblical church life. Yet, the focus of the true saint of God is not upon the blessings being accrued regarding the local church, and covenant Christianity, but upon losing their lives for the glory of God as the scriptures bid us.

A powerful example is given to us in Acts 5 regarding this mindset. We all know the story well, how Ananias and Sapphira kept for themselves what they claimed to have yielded for the common good. This is the belief system that I am speaking of; the overwhelming desire to heap upon ourselves goods for our personal benefit and increase. It is using covenant as a means to attain or accrue or to heap upon our own lusts while shirking the responsibility that is ascribed to covenant.

Invoking a covenant for the sole purpose of personal benefit and gain is outside the scope of covenant terms and purpose. Again, covenant does indeed afford its heirs a blessing; yet, the primary purpose of the covenant is not related to the blessings but the relationship: the blessings are peripheral. When the blessings of covenant become primary, it negates the terms and purpose of covenant and it renders the covenant ineffective, null, and void.

Yet, when our hearts are pure, and we see that covenant is a relational contract, and that our covenant commitment is to sacrifice, serve, and esteem our covenant family more highly than our own selves, there are multilpicious covenant blessings awaiting us that flow in abundance unto the saints of God. Yet, when there are those who affix their affections upon the blessings without the pure heart of sacrifice, commitment, and communion, the vitality of covenant begins to suffer and become afflicted.

This is what happened to Ananias and Sapphira, they affixed themselves upon what benefited them and not upon what benefited the common good. We know the outcome for them, and how can it be any different for us in the covenant of the solemn assembly? Yet, beloved as we lose our lives in sacrificial surrender for the common good there are covenant blessings there such as unspeakable joy, and divine protection, even provision.

The opening text reveals the covenant of the early church, and the common good idealisms that were being practiced amongst them. Moreover, we also see provision and protection as a part of their everyday lives. In this select incident we know the historical event that transpired quite well. Peter and John were on their way to the Temple for prayer and came across a lame man who had this physical dilemma since his birth. He was immediately healed after the Apostles laid their hands upon him and prayed in the name of Jesus.

Afterwards, we know see Peter and John being arrested for their faith and placed in chains for preaching in the name of Jesus. As the event unfolds we see the chief priests and elders threatening them not to speak or teach in the name of Jesus, but subsequently they were released from their bonds. Immediately Peter and John returned to their own company, reporting all that had been said and done. A corporate prayer meeting was invoked and God visited their prayer meeting and shook the meeting place with His glory and power.

Then we see their hearts of unity and surrender, even of their possessions that they might have all things in common. There was not any lack among them, because their hearts were one with another. Each believer in the covenant of the early church lived for the good of the whole, and great provision was noted in God's Word.

It is a notable thing that these two men went to their own company after such a crucial incident in their lives. They had been arrested, their freedoms restricted, their names mocked, and threatened. If this was to happen to you, wouldn't it be a huge event in your life? Of course! Yet, we don't see these men departing after their release to their families, or to any other location, but to the assembly of the believers.

This speaks volumes regarding the place the meeting together had in the hearts of the Apostles, and the early church. The key phrase in these passages of text is: "the multitude of them that believed were of one heart, and one soul." They had all things in common; they were living for the common good, and not for themselves.

I want to emphasize the essential truth for the early church, and every generation to follow, is the one heart and soul demonstrated in these texts. It is important that we know that these people were hard working and industrious people. This biblical pattern does not represent a few hard working men and women that are supporting a host of lazy people that would not work, but showed a few religious characteristics.

This is not the pattern; these people were of one heart and soul. Today's church seems to be split, the hard workers, and the lazy who want to feed from the spoils of those who work hard. There are people that will come to church and lift their hands and sing the songs, pray the prayers, amen the sermons, but they will not conform to the truth and labor with their hands as the Bible declares. They have a similitude of religious affections, but they are spurious, counterfeit, and they are parasitic in nature.

They find a host that will support them, pity them, understand them, but their hearts are not affixed upon the realities of the new birth, nor of the risen Christ, but upon their own lusts. They are dangerous beloved; they break the unity of the body and lavish upon the spoils of covenant life, but will never commit themselves in covenant. Cut off their bread line and see how long they stick around, it will show where their commitment lies.

Remember, truth is what sets the people free from their sins, Jesus is the truth! The proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ is the means appointed by God unto salvation; not breadlines and food pantries. Beloved, we must get this into our hearts; the giving of provision will never bring someone to Christ. I am not saying that we should be stingy, or even cold hearted. This would be an inaccurate assumption.

I am speaking of the coming together, the assembly of the saints. We are to be of one heart and soul. When it speaks of having all things in common, and that our possessions are common property, this is an attitude of the heart that prevailed within all of their regenerate hearts. If the assembly joined to its membership, imposters that were living to gratify their lusts, it would wholly disrupt the spirit of unity, and nullify the power of the church. It is joining the profane to the holy; the unjust to the just. The coming together is a sanctified act belonging to sanctified people.

We, especially in America, have misunderstood the biblical pattern for the local church. The assembly, or the meeting place, is not a place where sinners get saved. No beloved, it is a sanctified place where born-again believers assemble in the name of Jesus Christ to be edified, instructed, built up, and equipped. There is no mention in the scriptures that I have found that includes the unregenerate in the assembly of the just.

I cannot have all things in common with those with whom I have no common ground. I am assembling with my brothers and sisters in Christ to bring what God has given me to share for the common good. Each believer must have this identification. If an unbeliever comes, he comes for what he can get. He heaps upon himself the generous provision abounding amongst covenant people, but he has no motive to give or contribute. He will not, nor can he. His goals are not in common; but are uncommon. His motives are not common; but uncommon. He is not of one heart, one soul; but of another spirit. Joining this man to the assembly is equal to adding a harlot to a sanctified marriage; it is repulsive and destructive.

Ephesians 4:15-16

"But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love." KJV

I want us to see that the body is joined together fitly, and compacted (to cause to join together, knit together) by that which every joint supplies, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, making increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love. We are joined, knit, together by what each member supplies. Note, there is no mention of members joined by what they need, but only by what they give. This is dynamic and paramount.

What we have misunderstood in Western culture is the dynamics of covenant. We have no concept of this truth. Other cultures thrive because of covenant, but ours is dilapidated because of the lack of it. Community in its pure sense is the effect of covenant. This is where a covenanted people labor intensively and passionately for the good of the whole. This is a culture where individualism is a foreign and destructive trait that is not tolerated.

I have witnessed this sense of covenant amongst the Karen tribe inside Burma. These hard-working industrious people labor together day in and day out in the fields and jungles. The men and women alike are intensively laboring but their store houses are common. They live in their own homes, but their sustenance is common amongst them. They have store houses for their grain but they are not for individual families, but for the community. They retrieve as they have need, yet, each of them has contributed. None of them are laying around in the shade relaxing and enjoying the beauty of the terrain.

No, they are all laboring with their water buffalo, their hand tools, and tools in back-breaking labors. Yet, there is no want amongst them; their needs are met.

The body of Christ is to share in this covenant life. I am not suggesting that we are to sell our homes and live communally, but I am saying that we are to labor with our hands, and come together with sustenance, joy, giving hearts, and common purpose. You can live communally but be detached in purpose and heart. Likewise, we can live separately, yet, come together in one heart and purpose; this is covenant life that is purposed for the church.

Lastly, there is protection in covenant life when we come together. I am not speaking of protection from physical harm here but safety from the adversary. We see the early church suffering persecution often, even with beatings from whips and imprisonment. They were not spared from these things. Yet, they were protected from the adversary, the true threat to the church of Jesus Christ.

Matthew 18:12-14

"How think ye? if a man have an hundred sheep, and one of them be gone astray, doth he not leave the ninety and nine, and goeth into the mountains, and seeketh that which is gone astray? And if so be that he find it, verily I say unto you, he rejoiceth more of that sheep, than of the ninety and nine which went not astray. Even so it is not the will of your Father which is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish." KJV

I have often made mention of this passage and what it makes inference to. It is speaking of the imperativeness of bringing back astray brothers/sisters into the fold because of the safety there, and the dangers outside of there. These are sheep beloved, not goats! When a sheep goes astray, there are unqualified dangers awaiting. It is not the will of our Father for even one of these little ones to perish. What is this inferring? That there is imminent danger of a little one perishing when they wander away from the protection of the flock of God in the assembly.

Jeremiah 32:37-41

"Behold, I will gather them out of all countries, whither I have driven them in mine anger, and in my fury, and in great wrath; and I will bring them again unto this place, and I will cause them to dwell safely: And they shall be my people, and I will be their God:

And I will give them one heart, and one way, that they may fear me for ever, for the good of them, and of their children after them: And I will make an everlasting covenant with them, that I will not turn away from them, to do them good; but I will put my fear in their hearts, that they shall not depart from me. Yea, I will rejoice over them to do them good, and I will plant them in this land assuredly with my whole heart and with my whole soul." KJV

This is an Old Covenant pattern where God had in his sore displeasure dispersed His children; separated them. Yet, here we find the Father bringing them back together again to dwell safely. This is key beloved. In our sins we were separated and isolated; subject to multitudes of dangers. Yet, in covenant, God brings us back together to dwell in safety. This is election saints, whereby God brings us out of our sins by His mighty hand, joins us to Himself and to His people. He gives us one heart, and one way, whereby we fear Him, reverence Him, forever for our good, and for our children's good. He plants us in this land of the body of Christ whereby we mature and grow into the full stature of Jesus Christ our Redeemer. Hallelujah.

I used this passage because of it shows that God brings us together to dwell safely. There is safety from our adversary when we are together beloved. I want us to remember that this is not inferring a trouble free life, free from the dangers of persecution, and even martyrdom; but freedom from the adversary, the archenemy of our souls.

If only God's precious children could see the immense dangers of being disconnected from His body. The coming together beloved is the physical act that is driven by the spiritual need to be together. There is no replacement for this God ordained reality and necessity. The shirking of the coming together is fueled by two vices. One is the vice of ignorance; the other is the vice of rebellion.

The vice of ignorance is often the imprint of a culture that is permeated with sovereign independence. This means our culture impresses upon its subjects the necessity of independence from covenant and that freedom cannot exist within these God ordained parameters. Culture suggests and demands freedom and liberty can only exist outside of commitment and covenant. It is absurd but it is what culture impresses upon us.

Outside of Christ, we are all subjects of culture. In Christ, we are all subjects of covenant. When we are born-again, there must be a renewal of the mind. It is the re-formatting of our minds and thoughts with covenant truth, replacing the imprint of cultural idealisms. This beloved happens as the Word of God is preached and the lies of culture are overthrown with and by Christian truth. Ignorance is whereby a believer is yet dealing with indwelling cultural idealisms and lacking in biblical truth. We are yet independent simply because we have not been taught the dangers therein as well as the blessings of covenanted togetherness.

The second one is rebellion. This is solely the effect of degeneracy. The regenerate of heart are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and rebellion cannot exist there. Those who are rebellious against biblical truth and principles are manifesting their heart of evil. Sweet and bitter water do not come from the same well. When we find a person rebellious against the coming together, we find a degenerate soul, albeit this soul may have a religious appearance, his heart is as dark as night in sin.

Oh beloved, we must see that God has ordained the coming together as a means of provision and protection for His covenanted people. We must conform our minds to the realities of what God has purposed, and revealed to us in His Word regarding the coming together of His people.