

A Review of *“Does God Permit Worship When We Cannot Assemble in Local Churches?”*

Donnie V. Rader

I read with interest your article, *“Does God Permit Worship When We Cannot Assemble in Local Churches?”*. To say the least, I was very disappointed and discouraged by your stand. Despite your effort to prevent someone from taking your principles too far, they will be used to justify not assembling when someone wants to take the Lord’s Supper with them to the lake or elsewhere.

First, your title suggests that some question whether we can worship when we are not assembled. Who questions that among brethren? What I and others question is whether we can partake of the Lord’s Supper when we are not assembled (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 11:20, 33). This is like some denominationalist who may think we oppose worship on other days since we insist that the Lord’s Supper and giving take place on the first day of the week only (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:1-2).

You say, “We also know the early Christians were caught in circumstances at times where they could not gather with an established congregation to worship. What did they do?” You didn’t and can’t cite a specific case where one couldn’t assemble and also show that he/she partook of the Lord’s Supper outside the assembly.

You say, **“Does God permit worship when we cannot assemble in local churches?** Does He desire that all worship cease at such times as this? Does He permit us to teach, pray, and sing but not permit us to eat the Lord’s Supper on the Lord’s Day?” Again, your question makes it sound like someone is saying we can’t worship when we can’t assemble. Who says that? Your argument is based on human reasoning. This again is like a denominationalist saying, “You mean God allows us to teach, pray, and sing on a weekday, but not permit us to eat the Lord’s Supper?” Ron, I can show that teaching, singing and praying took place outside the assembly. However, the Lord’s Supper took place when brethren came together (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 11:20, 33). Does God permit worship when we have an extended stay in the hospital? Sure. But, that doesn’t mean I have someone bring me the elements while there. I would assume from your article that you might. I couldn’t.

I was really bothered by the following statements:

In the Lord’s Supper each one of us sits at the Lord’s table to share with him in memory of his sacrifice which saves us personally and individually – not congregationally.

Christ here focused on the personal participation of each individual who worships him in this memorial. He does not focus on the function of the local church.

If he intended to limit the observance of this memorial feast to individuals acting in the congregational capacity, he did it in another passage but not here.

No one denies that the individual partakes of the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11:28). The question is WHERE they partake (i.e. in the assembly). However, your statements leave the impression that

I can partake by myself and there is no need to “come together” in an assembly (though you suggest in the article it is good). First, you can’t show where anyone partook of the Lord’s Supper or was told to except when the church came together (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 11:20, 33). Secondly, why couldn’t I conclude that I can stay at home and worship (including the Lord’s Supper) long after the pandemic is over? If you tell me that I’m wrong, why does your argument not work for me now? Why can’t I say, “God saves me personally and individually – not congregationally.” Why can’t I say, “The Lord focused on the individual worship not the function of the local church”? Why can’t I say, “Where did the Lord limit the observance of this memorial feast to individual acting in the congregational capacity?”

In fact, I wonder why do I even need a local church at all? Why could I not argue that I will worship by myself at home (maybe include my family) – saying, “Where did the Lord limit the observance of this memorial feast to individual acting in the congregational capacity?”

Again, you say,

On the one hand, faithful saints will not abandon their duty to gather with the saints in the local church where they are members to observe the Lord’s Supper on the Lord’s Day, and then use Matthew 18:20 as an alibi for a quick fake worship separate from the assembly. The Lord is never with people who practice hypocritical worship.

How do I determine it is a “quick fake worship”? If the Lord’s Supper is individual and not congregational, why deem anyone’s use of Matt. 18:20 to worship apart from the assembly as “quick fake worship”? Again, why is it “hypocritical worship” if they are following the principles you have laid out that worship is *individual* and not *congregational*?

If you convince your reader that taking the Lord’s Supper is individual and not congregational, why would they need to use Matt. 18:20? That concerns two or three gathered together. If the Lord’s Supper is individual, then can one take it alone? If he needs to be with at least one or two more, then is it not individual! We can’t have it both ways!

This paragraph about 1 Cor. 10 was troubling to me:

Did local churches exist at Ephesus and Corinth where Christians could assemble to observe the Lord’s Supper? Indeed, they did, and God expected them to assemble for that purpose. Does this imply that a Christian can have fellowship with Christ in the Lord’s Supper only as a member of a local assembly because this fellowship is congregational in nature? No, it does not mean that. The absence of a local assembly does not preclude or negate individuals having fellowship with Christ at his table. The fellowship we have with Christ in the Lord’s Supper is personal in nature, not congregational in nature.

Again, I have to wonder why do I have to meet with a local church at all? After all, “the fellowship we have with Christ in the Lord’s Supper is personal in nature, not congregational in nature.” Why can’t I decide to take the Lord’s Supper with me on vacation and not assemble? After all, “the fellowship we have with Christ in the Lord’s Supper is personal in nature, not congregational in nature.”

Later you said,

If passages correcting abuses preclude such worship, Paul and Silas should not have been praying and singing hymns in prison but should have waited until “the whole church be come together in one place”

(Acts 16:25; 1 Cor. 14:26). To insist what Paul wrote to correct abuses in worship in the assembly of a local church precludes worship by saints not able to assemble with a local church is a false premise.

I am not real sure what your point is here. Also, not sure who might argue that we can't worship until the whole church comes together. The only point I would make (and that I hear anyone else making) is that we can't partake of the Lord's Supper unless we are assembled together. Seems that you are showing that we can worship (even though we are not assembled) and *then concluding* that we can observe the Lord's Supper (even though we are not assembled). If that is the point, what a jump to make! If that is the point, it doesn't follow any more than showing that we can worship on days other than the first day of the week, and then conclude that we can serve the Lord's Supper on days other than the first day.

Seems like you are making an argument from the silence of the Scriptures. We are not needing to find a passage that "precludes" anything, we are needing a passage that *includes* the Lord's Supper outside the assembly. Concerning the Lord's Supper outside the assembly, the Lord spoke nothing (cf. Heb. 7:14).

Can you show where Paul and Silas observed the Lord's Supper while in prison?

You argue from Acts 8:4:

For instance, after the murder of Stephen, Acts 8:4 says, "Therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word." As the saints landed in new places, did they cease to worship and commemorate Christ's death until local churches were established? And, if not, how did they conduct worship?

Again, who would argue that these brethren did not and could not worship? It is an *assumption* that they partook of the Lord's Supper outside of an assembly.

Toward the end of the article you said,

Neither should we plan events which draw brethren away from available local churches and hold a separate service as if the local church is just one of many alternatives for worship on the Lord's Day. If the local church is able to meet, God expects us to be there!

My question is, do I really have to meet with the saints (in a local church) to partake of the Lord's Supper? Why could I not argue that the Lord's Supper is observed individually and not congregationally (as you have done)? Why will you not allow people to use your arguments?

You mention M.C Kurfees and the Louisville church. I realize that many brethren closed their doors during the Spanish flu. However, that doesn't tell us anything about what God approves. (To be fair, I know that you were not arguing that churches should close because that is what they did in 1918). However, as you know not all brethren in that pandemic were willing to shut their doors. Some insisted that they assemble even under the circumstances of the pandemic (A. O. Colley and the church in Dallas, where he preached, is a case in point).

I have concerns that some brethren will be real slow in coming back into a worship assembly after the pandemic is gone. I have concerns that some may not come back at all. I have concerns that when the flu season hits next winter, some will stay away for two or three months (reasoning

that “that’s what we did in the Covid-19 deal”). And now I have concerns, that some will cite your article as justification for all that.