

DOES GOD PERMIT WORSHIP WHEN WE CANNOT ASSEMBLE IN LOCAL CHURCHES?

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We know when first-century Christians were able to gather with the saints for worship, that is what they did in keeping with such passages as Acts 2:42; 20:7; 1 Corinthians 11:17-34; 14; 16:1-2. There is no biblical rationale for abandoning the assembly to worship intentionally in isolation from it (Heb. 10:23-25). 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? Modern-day saints may also face similar circumstances and grapple with the question of what to do, as many are doing at the present time because the coronavirus has brought public gatherings for any purpose to a standstill.

Do we wish the Bible contained a chapter directly discussing this question? If the Bible were a case book listing every possible application of every principle of truth, the world could not contain the books! God revealed the principles necessary to guide us in every situation, but we must search for those principles and then struggle to make accurate applications in the varied situations we encounter in life. This is a test of our faith: Do we long to serve, worship, and please God so much that we will investigate His Word again and again, even reviewing passages we have studied many times before, in order to make the applications needed in each new situation which arises?

Longing to Worship God

Longing to worship God, David said in Psalm 42:1-2, “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?” In times of danger David longed for the assurance and strength his soul received in worshiping God at the temple. Saints also today long to worship God and want to do so in a way that conforms to His instructions in order to truly please and glorify Him.

Each act of worship has a unique design in the New Covenant so as to bring us closer and closer to the heart of God. **Preaching** proclaims His Word as it applies to every aspect of life including worship (1 Tim. 3:15). The saints at Troas were so hungry to learn that Paul preached well past midnight on one occasion (Acts 20:7). **Prayer** brings us to the very throne of God where we pour out our hearts in petitions on behalf of ourselves and all men along with much thanksgiving (Acts 2:42; 1 Tim. 2:1-2). Our **singing** brings glory to God and mutual edification to all who worship (Eph. 5:19). **The Lord’s Supper** on the Lord’s Day commemorates his perfect sacrifice for our sins (Matt. 26:26-29; Acts 20:7). **The collection** on the Lord’s Day sustains the work of the church by cheerful giving as we are prospered (1 Cor. 16:1-2). Combining these expressions of worship in meetings of the local church exalts God and unites us as His people, and we are instructed not to forsake “the assembling of ourselves together” (Heb. 10:25).

This valid question arises from time to time, and the present crisis of the coronavirus pandemic brings it to the fore again: **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? What shall we do about the collection? What are some passages and principles which might help us make decisions pleasing to Him?

Worship in the Kingdom of God

Christ ordained the Lord's Supper in **Matthew 26:26-29** at the conclusion of the Passover Feast. Eating unleavened bread and drinking the fruit of the vine commemorate his body and blood offered on the cross as the perfect sacrifice for our sins. In concluding this observance he said, "I will not drink henceforth of this fruit of the vine, until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom" (vs. 29).

The new kingdom of God began on Pentecost in Acts 2. The constituent units of the kingdom of God are individual Christians. Christ promised to share with each and every Christian in this memorial feast. 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. He died for each individual soul, not for each local church. He washes away the sins of each person, not of each local church. He adds each individual to his kingdom, not each local church. The kingdom of God is constituted by each individual saved by the blood of the Lamb, not by a collection of local churches.

Christ organized Christians into local churches where we serve and worship him together. We cannot abandon that part of our relationship and duty if we are to remain faithful to him. Yet, in this passage he clearly teaches that each individual sits with him at the Lord's table, not each congregation. 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.

The Lord's Presence When We Serve Him

In concluding the Great Commission, Christ made the powerful promise of his presence and approval when we submit in serving and worshiping him: "lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world" (Matt. 28:20). This principle can be illustrated in many passages including **Matthew 18:15-20**, where verse 20 reads, "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."

The paragraph in vv. 15-20 deals especially with how to correct sin which occurs against a brother. In verse 15 "thee and him alone" pictures the action of two souls seeking

resolution. Verse 16 involves the participation of the original two plus “two or three” more. Verse 17 involves the matter coming before the local church.

Verse 18 points to the authority of the revelation to be given by the Apostles in such matters, in particular the subject of discipline. Christ has introduced the subject, but the Apostles would give additional revelation on the subject in the future, binding and loosing on earth what God revealed from heaven (consider Jn. 16:13 with 1 Cor. 5; 2 Thess. 3:6-14; etc.).

Jesus said in verses 19-20, “Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” In this context saints join in fervent prayers for divine help in dealing with the thorny issues of sin and discipline which arise among Christians. Likewise, we need the assurance that when we seek to fulfill his will in the various cases which may arise, our Lord promises to be with us. In the larger picture of all of our work and service before Him, Jesus promised in Matthew 28:20, “Io, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world.”

When Christians gather to serve the Lord in small or large groups, we need to know he is with us. Both small and large groups were under discussion in the paragraph, some involving an informal gathering of a few saints and some involving the formal gathering of the local church. The “two or three” who might petition the Lord in verse 19 could include any and all of these groups.

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. On the other hand, “where two or three are gathered together” to worship if persecution or natural disasters prevent meeting with a local church, is this also fake or false worship? Or, is the Lord with them in this case because they did not forsake the assembly and they seek to worship him as best they can?

The Lord is with us when we do those things he designed and instructed us to do in serving and worshiping him.

Gathering to Worship

The New Testament clearly shows Christ ordained that saints gather to worship every Lord's Day in prayers, songs, teaching, eating the Lord's Supper, and giving into the collection. They met as well on other occasions, even daily at times, as we also do in gospel meetings, special classes and lectureships, and the like (Acts 2:46). Let's consider a few passages which address the gathering of saints in worship.

The Lord's Supper was strictly observed on the Lord's Day as we learn in **Acts 20:7**. Our Savior

arose from the dead near dawn on “the first day of the week,” and thus was “declared to be the Son of God with power” (Matt. 28:1; Rom. 1:4). Fifty days later on Pentecost, a Sunday, the Apostles were immersed in the power of the Holy Spirit, which initiated the Gospel Age. On that Sunday 3,000 souls submitted to Christ in water baptism for the remission of their sins – and thus the church of Christ was born as recorded in Acts 2. From that time forward the saints in Jerusalem met for worship until the church was scattered by persecution “throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria” except for the Apostles (Acts 2:42; 8:4). About 30 years later Paul joined the saints at Troas around the Lord’ table “upon the first day of the week” (Acts 20:7). It was the common practice of churches of Christ to gather for worship “on the first day of every week” (1 Cor. 16:2, NIV). Those instructions were given by the Apostles of Christ under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (Jn. 16:13; 1 Cor. 14:37).

1 Corinthians 10 warns saints at Corinth not to return to pagan temples to participate in feasts dedicated to idols. Christians “cannot be partakers of the Lord’s table, and of the table of devils” (vs. 21). The idol’s feast did no service to other gods because they did not exist but rather honored Satan and his domain of demons who do exist. Paul explained that drinking the fruit of the vine was “an act of faith,” “a claim of personal participation in the benefits of Christ’s shed blood,” and eating the bread likewise memorialized and claimed the benefits of Christ’s crucified body (notes in *Zondervan NIV Study Bible*, 2002, p. 1788). “The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread” (vv. 16-17).

The use of the pronoun “we” here refers to Christians everywhere eating the same bread and drinking the same cup. Paul wrote from Ephesus to saints in Corinth to say “the cup of blessing which we bless” is the means of our “communion” (KJV), “fellowship” (ISV), or “participation in the blood of Christ” (NIV) – they all gave thanks for the same cup and drank the same cup. This makes it clear that “cup” is used by the figure of metonymy for the contents and does not refer to a literal container reaching across the Aegean Sea. It also places emphasis on individual fellowship with Christ, not congregations drinking with Christ and claiming the benefits of his blood.

Did local churches exist at Ephesus and Corinth where Christians could assembly 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.

In **1 Corinthians 11:17-34** and in **chapter 14** Paul corrected abuses of the worship occurring at Corinth. The Lord’s Supper degenerated into a social meal, with some participants arriving early and consuming the elements before others arrived. Under such conditions there could be no true

fellowship with Christ: “When ye come together therefore into one place, this is not to eat the Lord's supper” (vs. 20). Twice Paul said common meals should be eaten at home and not provided by the church (vv. 22, 34). Furthermore, there should be an unselfish spirit of patient waiting until everyone arrived to partake of the Lord's Supper (vv. 21, 33). Above all, the original meaning and purpose should be restored to commemorate the body and blood of Jesus, thus proclaiming “the Lord's death till he come” (vv. 23-26).

Do instructions eliminating abuses in the Lord's Supper when a local church assembles preclude saints commemorating his death when the whole church cannot assemble? Some brethren may reach that conclusion, but it is not a necessary implication from the text.

Chapter 14 addressed abuses which occurred in proclaiming God's Word, in praying, and in singing. Filled with pride in a desire to display their gifts, some men in the church wanted to interrupt others who were speaking, and even some women wanted to prophesy or challenge their husbands who spoke. The Spirit through Paul instructed the men to eliminate all this confusion and forbid women to take the floor. These abuses when “the whole church” assembles were eliminated by two guiding principles: “Let all things be done unto edifying,” and, “Let all things be done decently and in order” (vv. 26, 40).

In past years a faction broke away from the church, insisting that since teaching was done when “the whole church” is assembled in one place we must conclude that simultaneous Bible classes are sinful. Actually, these instructions which correct abuses in teaching when we assemble in one place do not preclude other arrangements for teaching. Rather, the same principles preclude confusion and abuses whenever and however we teach. Teaching classes simultaneously under proper conditions can be done “decently and in order” just as teaching in one room can be done.

What Paul taught about eliminating abuses from acts of worship in the assembly does not preclude engaging in worship on occasions when the church cannot assemble or when saints cannot find or organize a local church for a period of time. 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. In 1 Corinthians 16:1-2 we read, “Now about the collection for God's people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do. On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made” (NIV). To “set aside” or “lay by him in store” (KJV) involves the worshiper donating funds based on his own freewill decision which are collected by the local church to conduct its work. This was done every Sunday. At times when we cannot assemble, we will have to consider what to do about our giving.

Worship When We Cannot Assemble in Local Churches

How will each Christian make a decision about how to worship including the Lord's Supper when assembling with the local church is not possible? Someone will insist, "You must produce an example of such worship including the Lord's Supper in order for it to be right." No, the premise behind this argument is fallacious in the first place. The premise is that passages correcting abuses in the assembly of a local church preclude participating in worship when it is not possible to assemble with a local church, and only an example can dislodge this premise. That is a non-sequitur, i.e., it simply does not follow in the logic of language and reasoning. Passages correcting abuses in the worship assembly of local churches do not preclude worship when no local church is available.

Furthermore, while we learn by approved examples, it is not necessary to produce a specific example of everything in order for it to be right. We learn by direct precepts and necessary implications as well as by examples. Passages such as Matthew 26:29 and 1 Corinthians 10:16-17 show that the primary fellowship which occurs in eating the Lord's Supper is between the individual saint and the Savior, not between the congregation and the Savior. Saints may participate in such worship while meeting in an established local church or while meeting in scattered groups in prisons, in the military, in times of persecution, in conditions created by natural disasters, in epidemics and pandemics, and under other such circumstances. Since the Bible does not include passages which directly address all of these circumstances, each Christian must make the best decision he can as these situations arise based on his understanding of passages and principles which do discuss worship including the Lord's Supper.

What shall we do about the collection as part of worship? One point to consider is that every act of worship is unique in some way. The collection is a gift which sustains the work of the local church. If we engage in worship where there is no local church, there is no program of work to sustain. Giving should not be done merely as a ritual or ceremony. Depending on circumstances, options might include sending funds to the local church from which we are separated or holding them each week until the time comes we are able to assemble. Donations might be made electronically at any time as an alternative to sending checks in the mail, but not as a substitute for giving when we are able to assemble on the Lord's Day.

We are not the first Christians to consider all of these questions. 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?

Paul worked and worshiped with several local churches during his life as a Christian, but he also spent weeks and months in travel and preaching in the effort to plant churches where there were none. How did he and his companions worship while traveling and laboring to convert people? Did they consider themselves a local church on-the-move in order to be able to worship until churches were established? Would such a concept be necessary in order for them to worship? How were they able to worship and commemorate the death of Christ on those many

travels and occasions of being where no local churches existed?

Acts 13-14 records the travels of Paul and Barnabas in A.D. 46-48 to the island of Cyprus, then to Asia Minor into the provinces of Pamphylia and Galatia. How long did it take in each place they preached to convert people and to establish congregations, and what did they do for worship in the meantime? In the years A.D. 49-52 Paul and Silas journeyed from Antioch of Syria eastward and crossed the rugged and treacherous Taurus Mountains as recorded in Acts 15-18. They crossed the vast regions of Asia Minor and passed into Greece in the provinces of Macedonia and Achaia, then returned to Palestine by ship. Acts 18:23-21:17 preserves events which occurred A.D. 54-57 as Paul, Silas, and later Timothy traveled and preached, which included another trip over the Taurus Mountains and across the vast regions of Galatia.

We learn in Acts 21 Paul was arrested in Jerusalem in A.D. 57 and was later taken as a prisoner to Rome as is related in Acts 27-28 where he was kept under house arrest for two years, finally being released in A.D. 62. Luke also traveled with him on a number of these occasions as is clear from his use of the pronoun “we” in Acts 16:10-18; 20:4-21:19; and 27:1-28:30. How did these saints worship in all these varied situations?

The last months of his life in A.D. 66-67 Paul endured harsh conditions in prison in Rome during the reign of Nero. During the weary weeks, months, and years Paul spent as a prisoner, brethren visited him when possible. During the first Roman imprisonment he was allowed to preach in his rented house (Acts 28:30). Is it possible he formed a temporary congregation which met with him there? How did Paul worship and observe the memorial to his Savior’s death when there was no available congregation? Did he form temporary churches in all these Roman prisons, or would he have been allowed to do such a thing? How did he worship?

There is nothing new under the sun. There are times when saints struggle to arrange to worship our Lord, but circumstances make it impossible to do so with an established congregation. They have not abandoned the church or their duties nor attempted to isolate themselves from brethren. In all sincerity they want to engage in worship although they are separated from their home congregation and there are no available local churches they can visit. Paul and brethren who traveled with him had the same sincere desire we do. And when he was imprisoned the same fire burned in his bosom. The early saints had to search for principles of truth to guide them just as surely as we do. Since we are not specifically told how they identified and applied those principles, we must simply search the Scriptures in our efforts to identify and apply the same principles they did.

There have been times in history when the government persecuted Christians and tried to prevent their worship services and to destroy their faith. The most notable example is when the Roman Empire tried to enforce emperor worship beginning with Emperors Nero and Domitian especially in the 90's and ending with the Edict of Milan in A.D. 313. Christians at times worshiped in early morning hours or at night in underground tombs called catacombs. Many were imprisoned and executed, but they persisted in their faith and in worship under all sorts of circumstances we

have never experienced. It is clear they were not always able to gather for worship as established congregations, but worship they did.

When Christians met in the catacombs, could they have eaten the Lord's Supper in different chambers or would it have been necessary to be in the same chamber to do so? History records it was necessary at times for them to subdue their songs almost as whispers to avoid detection – is such worship permissible?

In a different context, because of overflow crowds wagons were pushed up to windows of church buildings to seat people in the U.S. as late as the 1950's. In my lifetime fast-growing churches arranged for the overflow audience to sit in different classrooms. Was it proper to eat the Lord's Supper in such settings? During the coronavirus regulations churches have met in their parking lots with members remaining in their cars while worshiping which includes the Lord's Supper. Others have worshiped in their homes but have connected with each other by using such services as Zoom on computers and cell phones. Are all of these efforts false, fake, and hypocritical in the same category with people intentionally skipping the assembly to have a picnic in the park and bringing the Lord's Supper in a paper bag?

Please notice these are not hypothetical situations and I am not offering anything hypothetical to prove any hypothesis. These are all real situations which are not addressed in detail in Scripture, and the saints long ago had to make decisions guided by principles preserved in Scripture. Many of us blessed to worship with well-established congregations may not realize the varied circumstances in which Christians do not have this opportunity but sincerely seek to worship. Military personnel are at times moved from one base or facility to another periodically, and they seek other Christians with whom to worship knowing any arrangement they make will be temporary. Christians working in oil fields may be sent on extended but temporary assignments or shifts where it would be possible to find other saints wanting to worship but where there is no local church. How may they worship?

Providential Events Not the Same as Persecutions

If the government commanded us to disband churches of Christ in order to stop our preaching against the murderous violence of abortion or the evil perversions of homosexuality, we would not even consider complying. We would remember Acts 5:29, "Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men." Yet, we might find ourselves struggling to find opportunities for worship in circumstances far different than we are accustomed to now, just like Christians in other ages have done.

The coronavirus pandemic has presented us with a different set of circumstances because our ability to assemble in one place as a local church has been interrupted, but not by persecution. Instead, we are now reminded that there are times when we are "providentially hindered," which refers to God's rule over nature, the weather, and the whole universe. Elihu speaks of God's power over storms and said, "So that all men he has made may know his work,

he stops every man from his labor. The animals take cover; they remain in their dens" (Job 37:7-8, NIV). In different ways the operations of divine providence may prevent us from meeting as formal congregations and no one is guilty of sin in such cases. Our hearts burn with the desire to worship as always, but we are forced to search the Scriptures to identify passages and principles which can guide us.

The rapid spread of deadly diseases involves the operations of nature. We depend on medical professionals to judge the level of danger in such matters, just as we might depend on weather forecasters if typhoons, earthquakes, or volcanic eruptions were coming at the time of worship. In this present crisis the government is acting based on the judgment of medical professionals and based on the rapid worldwide spread of the coronavirus.

Under the present circumstances with the government directives designed to stop the spread of the virus, the elders of the Hebron Lane church in Shepherdsville, KY decided it was best to not assemble for a couple of weeks while trying to assess what the future might hold. Following that, we met in the parking lot of the church building with everyone remaining in their own cars. As each car parked, the elements for the Lord's Supper were already in the car. Praying, preaching, and singing was shared via our cell phones. Similar gatherings have been held in places like Alaska because of heavy snow and ice at certain times (Job 37:6, "He says to the snow, 'Fall on the earth,' and to the rain shower, 'Be a mighty downpour'" [NIV]).

For the church to function in worship, the Bible speaks of saints who come together in one place (1 Cor. 11:18; 14:23, 26). When we cannot come together in one place because of physical and providential circumstances, we are not guilty of forsaking the assembly. Therefore, we can only wait until such a time as we are able to come together again to give into the collection and to partake the Lord's Supper. But the question then arises, what are we permitted to do in the meantime? May saints meet for worship in their homes and share the Lord's Supper?

I only know to leave such questions to the individual conscience of each Christian. Each individual and family will have to decide what they should do in these unusual circumstances to serve the Lord and to remain safe. I know Paul and his companions traveled great distances to preach in places like the Province of Galatia where no churches existed, and they had to make such decisions as well. Whatever they did, we might think of Matthew 18:20, "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." This is not like a family intentionally abandoning the worship service to go to a picnic and taking the Lord's Supper along the way. Such actions cannot be done in Christ's name or authority and he is not with people who treat holy things in an unholy manner.

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!

We know Christians can sing, pray, and study God's Word at any time on any day of the week

and in any place. Therefore, livestreaming a lesson or using media to study together is very appropriate at any time.

The Spanish flu in 1918-1919 infected about 500 million people worldwide, one-third of the world's population, and killed about 50 million including about 675,000 in the U.S alone. This affected worship services throughout the country.

In the midst of that pandemic M.C. Kurfees addressed a letter to the members of the Campbell Street Church in Louisville, KY informing them "that, on account of such a rapid spread of influenza as to endanger the health and lives of the entire population of our country, the Kentucky State Board of Health, acting upon the advice of our national government at Washington, has issued a proclamation closing all churches as long as this order may be in force." He then stated, "Under the government's order each family, as was sometimes done in the days of the apostles, has the liberty and is hereby urged to conduct worship in its own home." Noting that "the current expenses of the church go right on," he urged the members to remember that when "our meetings are resumed we should double, treble, or otherwise increase our contributions according to the number of Lord's days our meetings shall have been suspended" or their contributions could be sent by mail. He concluded, "Let us all, in the fear of God, do everything within our power to meet every demand of duty upon us precisely as if there were no suspension of our meetings" (see news column "At Home and Abroad," *Gospel Advocate* LX, 43 [Oct. 24, 1918]: 1017).

There really is nothing new under the sun, but each generation faces challenges and crises which are new to its time and experience. Let us rest assured the Lord is in control of the universe as He always has been, and this moment will pass in His own time and way. We have nothing to fear if we focus our faith on Him and trust Him until this time of trial passes by His good providence.

I have tried my best to write so as to generate light rather than heat – the last thing we need in such difficult times is heated controversy which might leave lingering alienation among brethren. We need each other more than ever to encourage one another to be steadfast in our faith, hope, and love while passing through the trials spawned by this pandemic. And, hopefully we will be closer and more united than ever when this coronavirus finally passes. "May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 15:5-6 NIV).