

Togetherness in the Church

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References: Acts 1-14, Acts 1:12; Acts 1:14; Acts 2:5-6; Acts 3:1; Acts 4:31; Acts 10:27; Acts 13:44; Acts 14:1; Acts 14:26-28

Again, good to see all of you, those on Zoom and those here in the building. A lot have gone downstairs for the other classes. We're glad that we're together here. Eric Peterson has been preaching to us over the last few weeks on the subject of the church. And so I thought I would like to consider with you today an aspect of the church. And so that's what we're going to try to focus on.

What Is an Assembly?

So the question is, what does the church, the word church, mean? Most people on the street will say, "It's a building over there. It's a building here." And most people say the church is a building. So we at 16, we don't really call ourselves a church very often. We choose to call ourselves an assembly. Why would we call ourselves an assembly? Why?

Because the word church means an assembly. It means people called out—that's the Greek phrase, the Greek word, called out to be together. That's the Greek word. So we are an assembly of people. You come from here, you come from there, each of us—it's a strange group, each of us are different. We all came from different backgrounds. Fifty years ago we might walk past one another on the street and say, "I don't know you." And maybe we might even say, "I'm not really sure that I want to know. You're different from me now. You don't have the same interest I have." But we were all by the Spirit of God called out, and we were called out to assemble.

So why are we here this morning? Well, we—we're an assembly, and an assembly is only an assembly if it's together.

So I thought, Harold, why don't we have a theme this morning on the subject of togetherness? And I thought, Well, that's an interesting word, together. So I looked it up. There's far too many references to together in the Bible. So I thought, well, I better look—let's look at togetherness in the book of the Acts, because if they were together, and they

were together as a model as to how we should be together, we'd probably learn a little bit about togetherness from the book of Acts.

And so then I realized, well, there's probably more togetherness in the book of Acts than just the word together. They get together—that's easy to find. But when they were—when they were as a group, or there's other ways of saying together. And I didn't bother looking at them. I did find thirty-two references to together in the book of Acts. And I was amazed to find that there's two groups of people who got together in the book of Acts.

The first group is the Christians who got together. And the second group is—is there a second group? What's the second group that got together? The enemies of the Christians got together. So thirty-two references, just the word together in the Authorized Version. But thirty-two togethers in the Authorized Version. How many do you think are the Christians getting together? And of the thirty-two, how many do you think would be the enemies of the Christians? These are the Christians getting together, and you're all cranking it through your head, all right? And you're not going to be surprised when I tell you that sixteen times it's the Christians who get together, and sixteen times it's the enemies of the Christian getting together.

Is that significant? Yeah? It probably means that the enemy doesn't like it when you get together. It probably means that the enemy takes note when you get together.

The Danger of Missing Out: Thomas

So I thought I'd tell you this morning about the stories of sixteen times that the Christians got together in the book of Acts. And then I thought, No, Harold, you've got to tell them the story that comes before that. So I'm going to start out with a story that comes before the book of the Acts.

And so the story is about a man whose name is Thomas. How many disciples were there? Twelve. One of them was Thomas. So do your thinking now and tell me: what's the one thing you know about Thomas? What was that again? "Doubting Thomas." Isn't that amazing? There were twelve disciples. Judas was a betrayer. Of the twelve disciples, which ones were at the top and which ones were at the bottom? Do you think Thomas was at the bottom of the list of disciples? No, I don't think so. Actually, Jeet and Jazz will tell you that Thomas went to India. How many people in India do you think became Christians because of Thomas? Wow, you'd say that's a big number.

Isn't it strange? We all think of Thomas as Doubting Thomas. He wasn't bad; he was a good man. But we all call him Doubting Thomas. Two thousand years later, we say, "Oh, yeah, I know him—Doubting Thomas."

So can you remember why he was Doubting Thomas? Yes, you can remember. The Lord Jesus Christ rose from the dead, and He rose from the dead early in the morning. And in the evening, He went to His disciples, and they were absolutely thrilled when they saw the Lord Jesus. You can't imagine the thrill and excitement that came to them. And how many were there? Ten, and some others as well. But ten of the twelve disciples were there.

Where was Thomas? Well, I don't know. He wasn't there. He may have been home having supper with the family. He may have had a business appointment. I don't know. All I know is he wasn't there. They all got together, and he wasn't there.

Was that significant? Well, yeah, it was. Because, you see, they told him. They said, "Thomas, we saw Jesus, the risen Savior."

"He's not alive, Thomas; He's dead."

Thomas says, "I don't believe you."

Why didn't Thomas believe them? Because he wasn't there. Have you ever been somewhere—have you ever should have been somewhere, and you didn't go, and afterwards they say, "Well, that was really, really good. Where were you?" Duh. Thomas. He wasn't there. He wasn't there. And because he wasn't there, he didn't believe. And because he didn't believe, he got a reputation that has gone down for two thousand years, and it's not over yet. He got a reputation that he never should have had, never did want, because he wasn't there.

So what is my message going to be this morning? Answer: if you've been called out to be an assembly, make sure that you're part of the assembly, that you're there. Eric has been talking a lot about the body. The church is the body of Christ, and it is. What would you do if you got up one morning and you looked in the mirror and you said, "Something's wrong. My nose isn't here"? And so you go running around the house, you find your nose, and you say, "Why weren't you there?"

"Oh," and your nose says, "I had other things planned for the day. I was sniffing around."

You say, "But listen, excuse me, but you're my nose! Why aren't you there?"

"Oh, I'm the opposite."

Thomas, why weren't you there? And if you spoke to Thomas today, you'd say, "Thomas, you ever made any mistakes?"

Thomas would say, "Yep."

"What was the mistake you made, Thomas?"

"Well, you see, all the disciples got together, and I had an excuse. I wasn't there."

Together at the Tabernacle

So quickly, now, through the book of Acts, open your Bible to Acts chapter 1. We're going to go quickly; I'll try to spend a little more time on a couple of points. If we are the church, then the church is supposed to be together.

I'm going to give you one more introductory word. When the congregation of Israel got together after crossing the Red Sea, what did they do when they had finished building the tabernacle? What did they do? And the answer is: they got together at the tabernacle. Did they say, "I can't be there tonight because I've gone to the shopping center"? No, they didn't have any shopping center. Did they say, "Well, we had some games planned at the community center"? And the answer: no, they didn't have a community center. "Well, we were going out to the field to practice some golf." No, they didn't have a field, no. Did they have a school? Did they have a university? What did they have in the wilderness? They had the Lord and the tabernacle.

What did they assemble themselves together to? The Lord and the tabernacle. Why didn't the Lord give them a community center and a shopping center? Because He wanted them to assemble to Himself. Is it important? Well, it was in the days of Thomas. It was in the days of the children of Israel in the Old Testament, and it is in the book of Acts as well.

Together in Prayer and Gathering: Acts 1-3

So let's just quickly glance at some of these things. Acts chapter 1 and verse 14. Acts 1:14. And it says:

[Acts 1:12 NKJV] - Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey.

That's verse 12. Now, verse 14 is:

[Acts 1:14 NKJV] - These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.

They were there for ten days. What were they doing for ten days? They were all together, and they were praying. That's what Christian life is all about. Christian life is we all get together, and we pray together. Is prayer important? As you read through Scripture, you'll conclude, yes, prayer is important. And if you don't come to prayer meeting, you miss out on a lot of the blessings of prayer.

I told you the story—I never know how many stories to tell, but I just love the Mario Markopoulos story. Mario Markopoulos' mother was Mrs. Markopoulos; Olga was her name. And we used to come to prayer meeting, and Olga would say, "Would you pray for my son, Mario?"

And we would say, "Yeah, we'll pray for Mario."

And sometimes after the meeting she'd come up to you and she'd say, "Why didn't you pray for Mario?"

We said, "We—we pray for Mario." And whenever we asked if there was a prayer request, she'd say, "Yes, pray for Mario."

Mario actually had some friends here. He went to Kitsilano High School; he had some friends in Sunday school here. He came to Sunday school, I think maybe three or four times in his four or five years of high school. He wasn't interested. We prayed, and we prayed, and we prayed, and we prayed.

And then he got married—no, he got a job. His mother said, "I don't think he's got a good job. He's going to work at McDonald's. I would pray that he won't work at McDonald's." So he took a job and worked at McDonald's.

And then she said, "We've got to pray for Mario because he's going to get married. I don't think he's marrying the right woman." So we prayed for Mario, and we prayed for his wife.

And then one day, I'm not sure precisely why, he went along to a church. Actually, he ended up, I believe, sitting in front of a friend of mine. And an altar call was given. He said, "I'm going to accept Jesus as my Savior." He got saved! After how many years? Oh, those of us who remember this story say it was a long time. I don't think that prayer was answered for maybe fifteen years, maybe more. Probably fifteen. Would you think it's worthwhile praying for fifteen years? Go to prayer meeting and you pray for fifteen years? He got saved!

And then it wasn't long after that, maybe a couple of weeks, he said to his wife, he said, "I've got to work late tonight. Would you please tape Billy Graham for me? He's going to be preaching. I want to hear what he says."

She said, "Sure, Mario, I'll tape it."

So he came home late, and he said, "Did you tape Billy Graham?"

And she said, "Yep, I taped Billy Graham. But," she said, "he also said that if you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, you'll be saved. So, Mario, I asked the Lord Jesus Christ to save me tonight."

And we say, does God answer prayer? And Mario actually doesn't work at McDonald's anymore. He opened his own restaurant, and all kinds of people went to Mario's restaurant. When they went to Mario's restaurant, he told them about Jesus. And at this church that they went to, when people got baptized, they used to stand up and answer the question: how and when and where did you get baptized? And there were so many people who got baptized, got saved through—through the ministry of Mario and his restaurant, that people used to get up and say, "I got saved because I went to Mario's restaurant and he told me about Jesus." And all the congregation burst out laughing because it had happened over and over and over again! And who told me that story? The pastor of that particular church.

Does it pay to pray? Yes. Is our prayer meeting important? Yes. Are there many, many, many, many, many, many other opportunities and responsibilities that you should do at that time? Yes. What do you do? Say, "I'm going to pray."

All right, we've got to move quickly, and we haven't been moving quickly enough. So, chapter 2, and we're going to take a look at verse 15—is that right? No, we want to look at verse 4. It says, verse 5:

[Acts 2:5-6 NKJV] - ⁵ And there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven. ⁶ And when this sound occurred, the multitude came together, and were confused, because everyone heard them speak in his own language.

This was not just a few, but after the marvelous outpouring of the Spirit of God, people all came together. They didn't say, "I've got to go home for lunch." They said, "We're going to be together." And God did these wonderful things when they were together. They were together actually early in the morning. When Peter finally got around to addressing the congregation,

he said it's only nine o'clock in the morning. It was important for them to be there early in the morning.

Chapter 3 and verse 1:

[Acts 3:1 NKJV] - Now Peter and John went up together to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour.

When you travel through life, do you travel alone, or do you go through life with somebody else? It's good if you can do it with a husband or a wife, but that's not what it's all about. You go through with Jesus, but that's not also all it's about. It's that you go through with other Christians. It's kind of nice to have somebody beside you who's your friend, who will help you, who will encourage you, who will work with you. And that the concept of the Christian church is that we are together in the great work of God in the Christian church.

This marvelous miracle happened to Peter and John, who were together, and the other, many, many other Christians in the temple at that time at the hour of prayer. They were there. They were worshiping God, and they were used that particular day. How many people became Christians? Not precisely the number—we don't know—but thousands. Would you have liked to have been there that day?

Thomas, should you have been there the day Jesus rose from the dead? Yeah, would have saved a lot of embarrassment. Would you have liked to have been there the day that that man got saved and healed at the Beautiful Gate? You say, "Yeah, I would like to be there."

Boldness Through Togetherness: Acts 4

All right. Chapter 4 and verse 31. Chapter 4, verse 31. This is what it said:

[Acts 4:31 NKJV] - And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness.

Now, we can't go into all the details of that day, but it was a marvelous day. The disciples, the apostles had been released from prison; they had been set free. And they came back; they were together. They had prayed in particular that they would preach the truth of God with

boldness. So when they came back, they were all together. And what did they do? They preached the word of God with boldness.

Have you ever felt that it was wise to preach the word of God with boldness? You say, "Yeah."

Have you ever found it difficult? You say, "Yeah."

Why would you say, "Yeah"? Well, frankly, I was all alone. Thank you! But if there are fifteen of you there, and you were just one of the fifteen, do you think you'd be a little more bold? Boldness is something I think that comes from togetherness.

I always found it, when I was younger, easier to be bold when my father was there, because I would say to myself, Harold, if anything goes wrong, it's his fault. And so he'll look after it. Don't worry. I think it's marvelous that these people were together, and the Lord answered their prayer, but He gave them boldness. How marvelous! How do you learn to be bold? Well, one of the ways you'd learn to be bold is to be with someone who's bold, and they'd probably teach you a few things about being bold.

Gathering the Multitudes: Acts 10 & 13

All right. Chapter 10. Chapter 10. Chapter 10. Remember this story in chapter 10: Cornelius wanted to hear the truth of God, and so he asked Peter to come to preach to him. And he didn't quite know what that was all about. All he knew is that the Spirit of God had sent him. And so Peter said—no, Cornelius said, "I'm going to get my friends to come. This great, good preacher is coming, and I think I want to be there, and I'm going to invite my friends."

So verse 27:

[Acts 10:27 NKJV] - And as he talked with him, he went in and found many who had come together.

And Peter started to preach to them. Peter preached to them that day, and many got converted. Most of the people who came that day got converted. The Spirit of God came down, and it was a marvelous day. Many lives changed that day.

Would you like to have been there, or would you be happy to miss out? Maybe if you didn't come that day, when Cornelius told you what happened, you might say, "Well, I didn't come the first time to hear the preacher. I don't know that I'm going to worry about coming to hear Cornelius either."

Thomas, should you have been there? Yep. Thomas, did it have long-lasting implications? Yep. What should we be doing? We should be together. I think it's marvelous.

Let's keep reading. Chapter 13, verse 44. Paul and Barnabas had been preaching, and verse 44 says:

[Acts 13:44 NKJV] - On the next Sabbath almost the whole city came together to hear the word of God.

Wow. Is that important? Yeah. God's doing an amazing thing. The whole city is there. You want to be there?

Accountability to the Assembly: Acts 14

Chapter 14, verse 1:

[Acts 14:1 NKJV] - Now it happened in Iconium that they went together to the synagogue of the Jews, and so spoke that a great multitude both of the Jews and of the Greeks believed.

Is that important? Want to be there? Yeah? Wonderful. Wonderful.

Chapter 14, verse 26:

[Acts 14:26-28 NKJV] - ²⁶ From there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work which they had completed. ²⁷ Now when they had come and gathered the church together, they reported all that God had done with them, and that He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. ²⁸ So they stayed there a long time with the disciples.

What's the story? Paul and Barnabas had traveled all over the northern side—the northeastern side of the Mediterranean Sea. They covered wonderful areas. They went back, and when they went back, ultimately to Jerusalem, but they went back to Antioch. And Antioch was the church that they had been commended to the work of God from.

Okay, so here's Paul and Barnabas, and they've been told they've got to go and serve the Lord, and they said, "All right, we will go," and the church in Antioch sent them. Now, what do you think happened during the time that the church in Antioch sent them, and they came back a few years later? What do you think happened in the meantime?

Well, I think the church in Antioch probably prayed for them, don't you? And they sent them out as missionaries into no-man's-land, if you like. And I think that there were lots of times when that congregation got together and they prayed for Paul and Barnabas.

Now, when Paul and Barnabas came back, what do you think they said? They could have said, you know, "Frankly, we've had a pretty successful journey. Thousands have become Christians, and everything's fine. I think we'll go to Jerusalem, and maybe we'll talk to the apostles. Maybe we could teach them a few things."

Is that what they did? No, they didn't do that. What did they do? They said, "We were sent as part of the church at Antioch. We're going back to the church at Antioch." They sent them, and they sent them. "We are their servants. We're going back to them to tell them how God blessed us."

Is that wise? I told you before: I used to work on the other side of the world. My boss worked on this side; I worked on that side. What did I do when I came back to this side? I said, "I'd better go see my boss." And when I went to see my boss, he had some pretty important questions to ask me. That's reasonable, okay? So Paul and Barnabas, they didn't say, "We're independent. We can do whatever we want." They didn't say, "We report to the apostles." They said, "We are responsible to the church that sent us."

Our Ongoing Responsibility to One Another

Now, what is the implication of all this? And I've been saying to myself, Harold, I'm not sure we've done things right. Are there any people that you know of in China today? Any people that used to be in this congregation who are in China today? You say, "Yep."

Now, what about those people? Why did they go back? Well, they say some of them went back to look after their family. Praise the Lord. Some of them went back to straighten out some financial matters or other matters. Praise the Lord. Do you think some of them went back to tell their friends and family about Jesus? You say, "Yep. Yep." And if you were to ask them, they'd probably say that's the most important reason for going back. "My mother's going to die anyway, sooner or later. It might not be this year; it might be probably in the next ten years or fifteen years. But I want my mother to know about Jesus."

And so they ask us to pray for their families, and they go back. Now, do they go back independently, or do they go back as members of our church? Do we have a responsibility to pray for them? Yeah. Have they ever asked us to pray for them? Yeah. And when they go back, are they independent? When they come back to Vancouver, what should they be doing? Coming back to 16 and saying, "Thank you for praying for me. This is what happened." And some of them will tell you of some of their friends, family, acquaintances who've come to know the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior. And when they come back, they say, "Thank you for praying for me."

When do you cease to be a member of God's church? The answer is: you never do. Isn't that marvelous?

When do you cease to be a member of 16th Avenue Gospel Chapel? When you get on the airplane? No! You cease to be a member of 16th Avenue Gospel Chapel when you cease to work together with us, when you cease to pray with us, when you cease to be part of it. And just because you happen to go ten thousand miles away doesn't mean to say that you're no longer part of the church.

I think, frankly—I say this to my shame—I think that we should spend far more time concerned with members who used to be here, who have gone back into a hostile environment. Are there many where they've gone, ended up in a hostile environment? One of them said to me a while ago, "You know, there's a firewall between us here in China and you in Canada. It's the computer firewall. Sometimes," she said, "my computer can't get through to you."

Why is that hostile firewall there? Because China doesn't want to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ. They've stopped publishing Bibles. They are preparing to issue a new Bible; it gets rid of a lot of the truth of the Bible. They don't want the Bible.

What's our responsibility? To recognize that all who have left us have a primary responsibility, like Paul and Barnabas had, to take the gospel to the far sides of the world. We've got to pray for them, and we've got to welcome them back, and recognize they're part of us and we're part of them. And it's just as difficult for us to recognize that we're part of them as it is for them to recognize that they're part of us. But we are. We're all together.

When we have a 16th Avenue Gospel Chapel reunion in heaven, good—how many people do you think are going to be there? Well, I'm going to let you in on a secret: a whole lot more than are sitting in this audience right now. It's going to be a really happy day. Frankly, I'm looking forward to it.

We're to be together. The very name that we have is assembly, the assembled people. Remember, we're part of one another. And if we're part of one another, we've got to be together often. And as you go through the group, the most important thing that is recurring is: they were together for prayer, they were together for prayer, they were together for prayer, they were together for prayer. And we've got to pray together, and live together, and work together, and preach together, and be bold together, and make sure. Just because we move away doesn't mean to say that we've lost our responsibility to the local assembly and to all others who've gone. And those of us who stay have got to remember that we're responsible to them as well.

Closing Prayer

Lord, we thank You. Almost a disjointed kind of a sermon, Lord, but we're thankful that You didn't leave us alone. You could have saved us and then sent us alone into the middle of nowhere, but You didn't do that. You gave us brothers and sisters. It's true You gave us the Holy Spirit; it's true You gave us the Bible, and we thank You for that. But, Lord, You gave us brothers and sisters, too, and we praise You for that.

And then You gave us responsibility. Everyone in the family has responsibility. And, Lord, we all have responsibilities, and our responsibilities are to live for Jesus together for His glory. That's what we want to do.

So, Lord, we're looking forward. That's the beginning of September. We're looking forward, Lord, to a year, the twenty-sixth, twenty-seventh year. We pray that You're going to bless us. And, Lord, we pray that we might each say, "I want to fulfill my responsibility. I want to live up to my responsibility. I want to be together to enjoy the blessings and to be part of the reason for the blessings, Lord." That's what we want.

And so we commit ourselves. We give thanks. We pray: bless 16th Avenue Gospel Chapel. Bless all the other churches, too, Lord, but we pray that You'll bless us. And we give thanks in Jesus' name. Amen.