

THE UPWARD CALL

*Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet;
but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead,
I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God
IN CHRIST JESUS.*

(Philippians 3.13-14 NASB)

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ASSEMBLING TOGETHER [PART 4 — TWO OR THREE]

Not forsaking our own assembling together [*episunagoge*], as is the habit of some....
(Hebrews 10.25 NASB)

Those who have been brought into the body of Christ are joined *in* spirit with Christ the Head. “Going to church,” or “doing church” on Sunday, or even “being a member of a church”—all unscriptural terms—has no bearing on whether one is *in* Christ and part of His body.

Many in our day view the church with an institutional mindset that consists of a building (and often a big mortgage to pay for it), a budget, a pastor and his staff, a pulpit from which messages spew forth each Sunday, Sunday school, vacation Bible school, programs, committees, a membership roll, and many other things that have been adopted from organizations and institutions of the world. To top it off, this institutional church has a name over the door that declares that it is different in some way from other institutional churches in the area. In fact, their name purposefully has been set to declare that they are different from other Christians who meet down the street in another building with another name on the door. By the way, their sign out front states that they are led by the Reverend Doctor So-and-So, Senior Pastor and Founder. Now, this institutional church meets several times a week; they “go to church,” which means they go to a building with a name on it, “to do church,” which means they do something in the building generally related to some form of worship, singing, preaching, and paying tithes to keep the whole thing going from week to week.

Yet, when they leave their building, they have done very little to build up the body in love. They have simply done things and met their church obligation and often soothed their conscience. After all, many “go to church” because they are told that they must go. It matters not whether they touch life while they sit in the pews. What matters is that they sit in the pews!

I recall going to a worship time at a local assembly (I prefer to use different words to describe what others call “going to church”) and the music leader was on stage declaring that we were there “to do church,” and then he led the crowd in singing a song about “doing church.” At this point, my head began spinning as I tried to take it all in.

Of course, I am being facetious, but only somewhat; however, I realize that some might not think this is very humorous. Actually, I do not think the institutional church is very humorous at all; it saddens me when I consider it. Why? Because I think it robs the very life of the living body of Christ, which is the ecclesia, and has the tendency to mold people into the institution and not necessarily into the image of Christ. I am not stating that there is nothing good within the institutional church, for surely many people are helped in this setting and some even thrive within it. But is it the best? Is it that for which Jesus died? Does it bring about the unity of the spirit within the body of Christ in a locality? Does it bring about the unity of the brethren with one another? Does it express the love of Christ that the world would see and over which it would marvel? Does it free resources (money) so that the needs of others are met and the love of Christ is displayed? Does it free the Lord’s people to truly follow the Lord and seek the truth of the word of God? Does it equip the saints for the work of service? Does it cause the saints to attain to the unity of the faith?

Or, does it separate or divide the Lord's people into camps? As Paul would ask: Has Christ been parted? Does it keep the love of Christ within the walls of a building? Does it conform the Lord's people to the institution and the emphasis of the institution? Does it lift up the pulpit at the expense of Christ? Does it stifle seeking the truth of the word of God outside of what comes forth from the one standing in the pulpit? Does it have limited resources because so much of it goes to salaries and other institutional overhead, such as mortgages? Does it encourage the saints to love and good deeds, or does it stifle it because the pastor is supposed to be the builder? Does it build the faith of the saints, or does it destroy it? Well, many questions of this nature could be asked, and I am sure the answers would vary. I trust you see the contrast in these questions and can relate, at least in some measure, to what you see going on in the institutional church of our day.

For many years, we were joined with brethren who truly love the Lord. We were not perfect and, in fact, serious challenges entered into our midst, but there was much good and we learned a lot during the years we were with these dear saints. We had no name on the building and no weekly collection of tithes. There was a box in the back of the room for people to put money into as the Lord led them. There was little overhead, for there was no paid staff and no mortgage on the building. Apart from basic expenses and the upkeep of the building, a lot of which was done by the brothers and sisters, all the offerings went to care for the needs of the brethren and to support others throughout the world. I was always amazed at how much money came in each month and how much went out to help others with love gifts. I don't recall the actual numbers, but I can tell you that it was substantial.

I recall that over a decade ago there was a call for the Lord's people in our city to come together for a special outreach; even the mayor of our city supported it. I became involved with the planning of this event, so I saw some of the inner workings of it. One thing that struck me like a brick was that the so-called big churches in our city provided such small donations in relation to their size. In proportion to our size, the group of brethren that we were with donated more than any other assembly in the area. We could do this because we did not have the overhead that hindered us from giving freely as the needs came up. The so-called big churches had their budgets to keep so that they could support the institution. Of course, there may have been other reasons for the lack of support as well, such as they did not support the concept or approach of the outreach.

We need to be clear that if we belong to the Lord, we have been joined with Him as Head. He is the Head, and we are His body. This is the *ekklesia* that Paul reveals in his epistles. In this regard, we have been gathered together in Christ as His body *in spirit*. It is in this spiritual sense that we are gathered together in Christ. One day, this glorious dwelling of saints will be completed and will come down out of heaven, having the glory of God, to bring glory to the new earth in a spiritually perfected people, fully conformed to the image of the Son of God. This is what Revelation 21-22 is all about.

However, there is a present reality to being gathered together that starts with two or three. According to Jesus, a gathering of His people occurs when any number of His people gathers together in His name. It is so simple.

“For where two or three have gathered together in My name, there I am in their midst.”
(Matthew 18.20 NASB)

This type of gathering does not require a building, an institution, a membership roll, a pastor or elder, or any such thing. It simply requires two or three of His people gathered together in His name, and the Lord will show up to be in that gathering. This is what the Lord desires. This is life. This is the love of God expressed in and through His people. When two or three gather together in His name, meaning they are connected to their Head, then there is life, love, and growth.