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JOB'S SONG

When the storm winds blow with - in my life, When my three friends blame me for
 When the cy - clone strips me of my mirth, When the raid - ers rob me of
 When I have no - one in whom to trust, When the world a - round me seems

all my strife, When I get no help e - ven from my wife, E - ven then, my God, you are there.
 all my worth, When I start to curse the day of my birth, E - ven then, my God, hear my --
 so un - just, When the things I touch all turn in - to dust, E - ven then, my God, you will care

13. Fine

- prayer. Why must I, might - y God Have to feel your chast - ning rod?

2. D.C. al Fine

Songs sometimes take interesting turns. The words to this song were written about two years ago, while I was playing with my son in the park during a particularly strong wind storm. The opening phrase only had to do with the wind I was feeling. Somehow, though, Job's three friends crept in. That opened the door for Job's wife and the man himself. From there it was a short jump to a song written from the point of view of the man who endured so much without ever knowing why.

CONTENTS

Job's Song	1
A Tradition of Assembly	2
An Olympic Controversy	4

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A TRADITION OF ASSEMBLY

That the church assembles together is a given. In fact, the word translated church signifies assembling people together. In the Greek city-states, all government business was accomplished through an assembly of citizens, and the word for calling out that assembly became the word used for the gathering of the church. Assembly was such a natural part of church life that it was several years before the writer of the letter to the Hebrews saw the need to “command” assembling together. (Heb 10:25) Nevertheless, even something as common as the assembly, perhaps because it was so commonly accepted, had traditions develop around it.

Most members of the churches of Christ over a certain age are familiar with traditional patterns in the assembly. Use the phrase, “two songs and a prayer,” and many people will recognize that you are talking about the “traditional” order of worship of the fifties and sixties (two songs, a prayer, one song, the Lord’s Supper, a song, the sermon, a song, closing prayer) that a congregation was expected to follow or some of the older members

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would get upset. The song leader who added an extra song or changed the order of the prayer and the Lord’s Supper might never lead singing again. Perhaps other groups had similar traditions in their worship assemblies.

That shows the problem with such traditions. They become so ritualized that nobody dare change them, no matter that they have no scriptural basis. Nor have things changed in the past forty years. Traditions of assembly are still being discussed. These discussions often fall into one of two areas.

What makes an assembly?

This is probably a modern question. Over the years many congregations have developed what is sometimes called “Sunday school” or “Bible class.” At least for adults, these tend to be more informal studies which may or may not include a prayer and almost never include singing or some of the other things commonly done in the “general assembly” or “worship assembly” of the church. Because they are more informal, many do not consider them an assembly of the church. Thus those who would never allow a woman to speak in the worship

assembly might allow her to participate in the Bible study. Those who object to such innovations as puppet performances in teaching in the “worship” might allow them in Sunday school.

Because the distinction between Bible class and worship (does that mean you don’t worship in Bible class?) is so traditional it has even led to inconsistencies. Among those groups that follow the biblical mandate that a woman remain silent in the assembly, holding a separate Sunday school class has developed into a forum in which women may, and do, speak. And yet there are many such congregations that will not allow a woman to teach a class if any of the young men in the class have been baptized. They quote the requirement that a woman not “usurp authority over the man” (1 Tim 2:12) but in other classes ignore the final phrase of that verse, “but be in silence.” Tradition is used to circumvent one concept that is objectionable to some while at the same time using the same principle to establish tradition.

So the question is raised, what makes an assembly? The answer possibly depends on how far you go with the traditional view of who makes up a congregation. Those who claim that such a Bible class is not the assembly of the church may do so based on the idea that Bible classes don’t involve the whole church; they are subdivisions of the church. In part this is based on the idea that a congregation consists of those who have “placed membership” or are on the “roll” of the church. Since not all the members are gathered together in the same room (as if that ever happens) it is not an assembly of the church. Since the elders cannot be in every classroom it must not be an assembly of the church.

Among the more conservative congregations of the Church of Christ this might lead to some problems. There are congregations that believe that a building paid for and maintained out of the church treasury is to be used strictly for church use. The building is not to be used for common meals, weddings, or funerals. If Sunday school (which some of the most conservative reject) is not part of the assembly of the church, then can you even hold classes in the church building?

Others will argue that a congregation is made up of those who are congregated. Formal membership rolls are meaningless. If one is not present at an assembly he is not part of that congregation that day. If he is present, even if visiting from another town, he is part of that congregation for the duration of his presence. Using this definition of a congregation of the church, any gathering of “two or more” constitutes an assembly of the church if the purpose is related to the church. That is, a family unit may not be an assembly of the church if they are together

simply as a family, although they may be an assembly of the church if their purpose is a function of the church. Two or more Christians may go to a baseball game and not be an assembly of the church, but if they are gathered to serve in the name of the church they become a congregation. Those who follow this definition would then argue that dividing into multiple Bible classes, even if or especially if in the same building, constitutes multiple congregations of smaller size. (I am not sure whether, for instance, if a cradle roll class has only one teacher it could be considered a separate assembly, being only one Christian, regardless of purpose.) A Bible class of six Christians would be an assembly of the church as much as the class of fifty meeting in the auditorium. Further, some would argue, if those who meet for class in the auditorium remain in their seats until the “worship,” how did they without moving change from a non-assembly to an assembly?

These issues, being traditional, will never be resolved. Some people will take one view while the person sitting next to them may hold the exact opposite. Most of the time it will not make a difference. When it comes down to certain practices, however, some may argue that it makes a significant difference.

How often?

The big debate over the traditions of when to assemble is whether the church should assemble exclusively on Saturday or Sunday. That debate is sometimes complicated by some people’s having a tradition of referring to Sunday as the sabbath. Sunday never was the sabbath, never was intended to be the sabbath, and never involved the commands relative to the sabbath.

Exclusive Sunday assembly is probably an outgrowth of the resurrection having been on a Sunday. Since many people participate in the Lord’s Supper, a memorial of the death and resurrection, every week it was logical that the tradition to do so was on the day of the resurrection. Over time churches got away from assembling on other days, but retained the Sunday assembly. For hundreds of years that was the tradition.

In the middle 1800’s, some people, most notably Ellen G. White, began advocating a return to the Jewish sabbath for Christians. They believe that God established sabbath for everyone (and essentially that all the “moral”—as opposed to “ceremonial”—Jewish laws apply to all Christians) and a violation of sabbath is departure from God. They go further, to state that assembling of the church together on Sunday is a violation of sabbath. They do avoid secular work on sabbath, but often ignore some of the other aspects of Jewish sabbath keeping, such as not carrying anything outside the home on sabbath. . As a result, many today object to Sunday assembly of the church. The contention is that sabbath is the only day on

which the church should assemble, ignoring that assembly was only a minor aspect of sabbath keeping.

Those who object to Sunday assemblies are often surprised to find that the churches of Christ have a tradition of assembling at least twice a week, or three times a week if they count a Sunday evening assembly as a Monday assembly. There was a time when most congregations would assemble every day at least one week out of the year for a “gospel meeting.” Going much farther back, we find that the church assembled daily. “And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, Praising God, and having favour with all the people.” (Acts 2:46-47)

Beyond the sabbath debate, some people question the practice of mid-week or daily assemblies of the church. Jewish practice has always been one of daily assembly, although even among the Jewish people it is often hard to find ten men willing to assemble at the same time daily. As previously noted, the early church in Jerusalem assembled daily. Because of our formalized

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assemblies, most people are unwilling or unable to devote the time to a daily, or even mid-week, assembly. The justification sometimes takes the form of, “I come to the Sunday assembly and take communion; besides, the Bible never commands any other assembly.” Of course, the Bible doesn’t even command Sunday assembly, but don’t tell them that or they will stop assembling with the church altogether.

How often should the church assemble? That is a difficult question to answer. Perhaps the best answer is, “as often as they choose.” Traditionally, once a week should be taken as a minimum standard. It used to be that in some places in the United States schools were not allowed to schedule events on Wednesday nights because that would interfere with mid-week assemblies. It might be interesting to note whether daily assemblies (even if the membership changed from day to day) could be shown to build stronger, more faithful churches.

Ultimately, the day and number of times of assembly is less important than what the congregation puts into the assembly. It is not a matter of what you do “how often” as what you do “as often.”

AN OLYMPIC CONTROVERSY

The modern Olympic Games have long been a hotbed of political activity and protest. In contrast to what Pierre de Coubertin thought the games should be, the games may be best remembered for the times of dissent. Think of the games most people can identify. The Berlin Olympics (1936) almost did not see the United States team compete out of protest against Nazi policies; instead they are famous for Hitler's anger over the victories by Jesse Owens. The enduring image of the 1968 games in Mexico City is that of Tommie Smith and John Carlos with their raised, black-gloved fists in support of human rights. The Munich games of 1972 should be remembered for names like Frank Shorter, Olga Korbut, and Mark Spitz; instead they are best known for the Black September massacre of the Israeli team. Eight years later the Moscow Olympics were missing 64 delegations, including the United States, most in protest over the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. In response, the Soviet bloc boycotted the Los Angeles games in 1984. Even the most recent Summer Games in Beijing were not without controversy, with many protests over China's continuing occupation of Tibet. For an event that was supposed to bring nations and athletes together, the modern Olympics have had more than their share of controversy.

But then, considering the history of the original Greek games, this should have been expected. Because of the modern Olympics, most people are aware of the original Olympic games, named for Mount Olympus where they were held. Many people are unaware, though, that other city-states competed to have the best athletes participate in their games. Perhaps the best-known rival of the Olympics was the Isthmian Games in Corinth. But controversy over the Olympic (and other games) went even deeper, to the religious level.

During the period of Herodian rule in Israel there were several factions of the Jewish elite. Perhaps the most famous, because of the accounts of the gospels, are the Pharisees and Sadducees. The Greek games affected even those sects.

The Pharisees (meaning "set apart") stood for many things. Most notably, in relation to athletic competition, they stood for maintenance of Jewish laws and customs. One objection to the games was simply that they were an aspect of Greek philosophy, including the idealization of humanism as opposed to elevation of God. Part of that philosophy included nude competition in the games. Athletes would work on their physiques and show them off by oiling their bodies. (Not that such a thing happens today.) The Jewish traditionalists could not compete nude, so they would, for the most part, ignore the games. A notable exception was the apostle Paul, who appears to have been a fan of athletic competition.

The Sadducees were the financially elite of Israel. To maintain their position they advocated assimilation of Greek culture into Jewish life. This included the games. It is even reported (by the Pharisees) that some Sadducee men would surgically have their circumcisions reversed so that they could compete in the games without standing out from the rest of the athletes.

Their respective positions on athletic competition were minor compared to other issues of the day. The Sadducees died out after the destruction of the Temple (since the Temple worship was the one central fact holding them together). The Olympic games outlasted them by about 200 years. Nevertheless, even in a remote part of the Roman Empire, such as Jerusalem, the Olympic and Isthmian games had a polarizing effect even two millennia ago.