

Truth of the n.t. Assembly

by William MacDonald

The sermon emphasizes the importance of knowing, being convicted of, and committed to the principles of the New Testament assembly.

Duration: 39:51

Scripture: Ephesians 4:7-11

Topics: "Assembly Meeting"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker focuses on Ephesians chapter 4, specifically verses 7-10. The passage talks about the grace given to each believer according to the gift of Christ. It also mentions how Jesus descended to the lower parts of the earth before ascending to heaven. The speaker emphasizes the importance of knowing and being convicted of the truths of the New Testament, as well as being committed to them. They share a personal example of their father's commitment to attending church, highlighting the significance of being committed to the assembly. The sermon also touches on the devil's opposition to the truth of one body, and the need to resist division and maintain unity.

Transcript

I still have a few of these brochures left of the Discipleship Intern Training Program, and I'm leaving them down here at the front in case anyone still wants one. I thought tonight I'd just like to speak to you on the precious truth of the New Testament assembly. I don't think I'll say anything that's new to you, but I will try to serve it up with a sprig of parsley.

And a lot of what I say comes as a basis of personal exercise before the Lord. Some of it will be autobiographical, how the Lord has dealt in my life concerning this subject. My first point is this.

Know what you believe. We have to know what we believe. Paul Little wrote a book with that title some years ago, and it's a good one, isn't it? But I feel that we should know what we stand for.

In brief, we believe there's only one body, the body of Christ. That means no denomination. We believe that Christ is the head of the Church.

That means no pope. We believe that all believers are members of the body of Christ. That means no sectarianism, doesn't it? We believe in the plurality of elders.

That means no one-man minister. We believe that the saints are the ministers. That means no clergy-laity relationship.

We believe that all constitute one equal brotherhood. That means no distinguishing titles. We believe that Christ is the gathering center of his people.

That means no fickle congregation. I'll explain these in just a moment. We believe in the autonomy of the local church.

That means no headquarters on earth. And finally, we believe in the priesthood of all believers. That means no mediator but Jesus.

Let's go over those one by one. We believe there's only one church, only one body of Christ. I think of the gracious movement of the Spirit of God 150 years ago when this great truth was recovered out of the rubble of tradition of many centuries.

And I think of how that roused the devil. I want to tell you the devil hates that truth. The truth of one body, and he will do everything he can, inciting division of every kind to mar the testimony of the one body.

But it's there, just the same. A few weeks ago I was on a plane with a young friend flying to Hong Kong. And he had his Bible out and he was writing.

A gentleman walked by and he said, Preparing a sermon? And Dave said, Yes, as a matter of fact I am. And he said, Yes, I saw you with your Bible. A wonderful book.

The man said, Who are you anyway? And David started to dance the dance of the seven veils. He said, We're Christians. The man said, Well, I gathered you were Christians.

He said, But who are you? And he said, Well, we're believers in the Lord Jesus. And the man said, Yes, I rather took that for granted. But he said, Who are you? And David said, Well, we really are disciples of the Lord Jesus.

You know, that man wasn't happy unless he could pigeonhole us. Isn't that interesting? What's the matter? Why couldn't he sleep that night unless he had us categorized? Rather interesting. I think we should face this fact that when we adopt the position of one body, we will always be a speckled bird in the evangelical community.

I faced that years ago, and it doesn't bother me anymore. I just don't fit with a lot of them. Is it because it's a convicting truth as far as they're concerned? I don't know.

Incidentally, this man was a dear man. He was a pastor of a huge church in Tempe, Arizona. Probably 3,000 people in the church, and a real lover of Jesus.

But it amused me to hear him peppering David with the questions, and David practically dancing a jig to stand true to the truth of the one body. One body. No denomination.

Rather interesting to me to hear people defending denominations when the Word of God doesn't have anything good to say about them, does it? Not if I read 1 Corinthians correctly. Christ is the head of the church. I said that means no pope, but it means more than that.

It means no diatrophies either, doesn't it? It means no man without ecclesiastical garments or without ecclesiastical titles taking to himself the position of the head of the church. But it means more than that. You know, the elders don't run the local assembly.

Does that come as a shock to you? The elders don't run the local assembly. Christ is the head of the church. The role of the elders is to be such spiritual, godly men, so much in touch with the Lord Jesus that they know what He wants them to do.

That's rather revolutionary, isn't it? But it's true just the same. And if we believe that Christ is the head of the church, it will keep us on our knees before Him, keep the lines of communication open, so that He might direct us, that He might have that place of headship in the assembly. All believers are members of the body.

This is a precious truth to me. No sectarianism. You know, sectarianism is a weed that grows in every human heart, including mine.

It really is. I have to fight it all the time. But I tell you, it's a wonderful thing to have a heart wide with affection for every true child of God.

I try to draw a narrow circle around myself as far as the truth of God is concerned, but I try to draw a wide circle around myself as far as God's people are concerned. Let me give you an illustration. I love my charismatic brethren.

I can't agree with their doctrine. I can't do the things that they do. But I love them just the same in the Lord.

I really do. And I can learn from them. I think this is part of the truth.

All believers are members of the body. I have never met a Christian yet that I couldn't learn something from. And as far as these dear brethren are concerned, I can learn love from them.

I can learn zeal and enthusiasm and a real fervent love for the Lord Jesus Christ. As far as I myself am concerned, I feel like Luther. My conscience is captive to the word of God.

I say I can't do what they do. I don't believe some of the things that they believe. My conscience is captive to the word of God, but I can love them just the same.

Some of you have been. Some of you are in the armed forces. It's wonderful to travel throughout the world and meet people who love the same Lord Jesus you do.

I'll tell you, the lines don't make too much difference at a time like that. It's just great to embrace them as brothers or sisters in Christ. We believe in the plurality of elders.

Actually, this is something that's being recognized very widely in the evangelical world today, and we're going to say more about that. We believe that the saints are the ministers. That word minister is really unfortunate, isn't it, in the English language and in the translation of the King James Bible.

But if Ephesians 4 teaches anything at all, it teaches that the work of the ministry is to be done by the saints, and I'll be speaking about that in just a moment as well. We believe that we're all one equal brotherhood, and this means that no distinguishing titles. And it's easy for us to drift away from that, too.

Remember the Lord said, don't call anyone your teacher. Don't call anyone your master. Don't call anyone your father.

We have God the Father. We have God the Son. We have God the Holy Spirit.

But, you know, the human heart loves distinguishing titles. And when these distinguishing titles are brought into the assembly of God's people, what they really say is, now, you people better listen extra carefully, because this man has this title, and he is especially entitled to your undivided attention, which I reject. I reject.

It isn't that title that makes him eligible to convey the truth of God to me. We're apt to flip in a lot of these areas. We believe that Christ is the gathering center of his people.

And I said when I first mentioned that, that means no fickle congregations. We don't gather to a man. We gather to the Lord Jesus Christ.

We go to those meetings because we believe he is there. Somebody says to me, why, he's everywhere. He's omnipresent.

Yes, but his presence is promised in a special way when his people gather together in his name. And I want to tell you, if you have a group of Christians who see the truth of Christ as the gathering center of his people, you'll see a group of Christians who will stick with divine principles through thick and thin. If you have people who are gathering to a man, you're apt to have trauma.

You're apt to have a crisis. If anything happens to the man, if he leaves. And we want to keep that truth before us all the time.

Christ, the gathering center of his people. We believe in the autonomy of the local church. That every local church is responsible directly to the Lord Jesus Christ.

He is the Lord standing in the midst of the golden lampstand. And there's nothing between each individual lampstand and the Lord Jesus Christ himself. And this is a marvelous truth.

You know, the more I see these divine principles in the word of God, the more I realize how divine they are. For instance, you have communism coming into a country. If there are headquarters, if the churches are not autonomous, all they have to do is seize the headquarters and they control the whole thing.

And incidentally, that has been the history of the spread of liberalism and modernism in the United States. Because the churches are not autonomous, all they have to do is seize the seminary. And in time, they have the whole denomination.

Because the ministers go out from the seminary to feed the churches. They seize the seminary or the denominational headquarters and it's a timeless struggle like communism. They're not worried about the passing of a few years.

Just give them a few years and they'll have the whole thing. And then we believe in the priesthood of all believers. We believe that there's no mediator between God and man but the Lord Jesus Christ Himself.

What a wonderful truth that is that each one of us at any time of the day or night has access into the very throne room of the universe to converse with God our Father, with the Lord Jesus Christ by the Spirit of

God. We must know what we believe. Incidentally, let me just mention that Brother Harold McKay has a little book called Assembly Distinctives.

I just finished reading it and I like it. And I think we should use it. It's a good little booklet put out by Everyday Publications in Toronto.

How many of you have seen it? Oh, quite a few. Good. That's great.

You're well indoctrinated. The second thing is we need conviction in our souls concerning these truths. It's one thing to know them.

It's another thing to be convicted of their truth. And this is a work of the Holy Spirit of God, isn't it? I remember when I was out in the Navy in Honolulu during the Second World War. This is the way it came to me.

I had been born into an assembly and brought up in the assembly. And I'd just like to pause here and say and pay respect to that assembly. It's the only Bible school I ever had.

I never had a formal course in the Bible in my life. But I owe a lot to that assembly and to those dear brothers and sisters among whom I was brought up. Brother Fesh mentioned as books that influence his life Grant's Numerical Bible.

Our first Sunday School teacher was Florence Goodhue, Grant's secretary who did all the typing for Grant's Numerical Bible. And she would line us up and drill us on the scriptures. I tell you that assembly was God's way of grounding us in the truth of God.

But when I got out to Honolulu in the Second World War this question came to me. Bill, are you in the assembly because your father's in the assembly? Do you have personal convictions about the assembly? Would you be just as happy in a denominational church? Mind you, I have to admit that at that age some of those denominational churches had a real glow to them as far as I was concerned. They did.

They looked very, very attractive. And sometimes our assembly looked very, very drab if I may say so. I mean to outward appearances.

And so I said, that does it. I'm going to go to the Word of God. I'm going to get my convictions from myself.

And do you know where the Lord led me? He led me to Ephesians 4. Let's turn to it for just a moment. Ephesians chapter 4. And this was very real in my life. I really believe it was the Spirit of God directing my attention there.

Ephesians chapter 4. I'll begin at verse 7. It says, But unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ. Wherefore, he says, Wherefore, it says in the book of Psalms, When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive and gave gifts unto men. Now that he ascended, what is it but that he also descended first into the lower parts of the earth? He that descended is the same also that ascended up far above all heavens that he might fill all things.

Here it is. And he gave some apostles and some prophets and some evangelists and some pastors and teachers for the perfecting of the saint. Forget the commas if you have the King James.

The commas are not inspired. They're not part of the original text. And they create a wrong impression here.

What it really says is for the perfecting of the saint unto the work of the ministry unto the edifying of the body of Christ. And I'll tell you it was like the coming of dawn to me. I thought, that's it.

The risen, ascended and glorified Christ gave gifts to men. And he gave those gifts not so that the men would become perpetually dependent upon them but that those gifts might perfect the saint unto the work of the ministry unto the edifying of the body of Christ. I've never been the same since then.

That settled my soul that the principles of the New Testament were indeed divine. And I've been rejoicing in them ever since. Mind you, our carrying out of the principle is somewhat less than divine.

Isn't it? But the principles are there just the same. And I really believe that we all need to develop our convictions to go to the word of God. And I'm not afraid to send people to the word of God.

If these things aren't true, let's face it. But if they are true, let's be loyal to them. The next thing we need is commitment to these truths.

Commitment. It's one thing to be convicted of them and another thing to be committed to them. And I saw a living example of this from my earliest days.

We lived in Lemonster, Massachusetts. We had no car. And my father used to carry my brother and myself on his shoulders through snowdrifts to get us to the assembly.

That's commitment. Isn't it? And whenever the doors were open, the McDonald's were there. I never remembered that it was a matter of option.

It was just understood that we were committed to that assembly. And you know, it's a great thing to be committed to the assembly. You know why? Because every so often the Lord Jesus manifests himself in a special, unforgettable way.

Have you ever been in a meeting like that when a heaven seemed to come down and the glory of the Lord is revealed so that the priest can't minister? And I tell you, you don't want to miss it when that happens. You don't want to miss it when that happens. And so there we were, kids, you know.

You say, when do kids get out of a service like that? More than you think. And we were taught to sit there still and take it in. And we did.

I was reading in a book recently of an elder in an assembly in North America who refused an invitation to a dinner at the White House because his duties as an elder were so great that they would not permit him to go. Different that commitment. I think I could have thought of 60 theological reasons why I could have gone to the White House.

But that's true. That's true. His work, his duties as an elder were so great that he turned down an invitation to the White House.

The story is told of Michael Faraday how at one time he gave a brilliant presentation on the properties of magnetism. Actually the Prince of Wales was in the audience at the time. And it was so brilliant that there was a tremendous applause at the end of his presentation.

And then the Prince of Wales himself stood and asked them to vote a vote of congratulations to Faraday. But when it was finished they looked for Faraday and he wasn't there. Do you know where he was? That was the night when his church was having its prayer meeting.

A church in which there were rarely more than 20 people in attendance. And Michael Faraday had slipped off to the prayer meeting. That commitment.

I can remember we were talking this morning I think it was about statements that have influenced your life. I can remember two things that Alfred Mase said to me. And they've been a help to me and I've tried to follow them.

He said, Bill, when you get divine principles stick to them. Isn't that good? When you get divine principles stick to them. The other thing he said to me was no man's gift is too big for God's principles.

What does that mean? That means, look, assemblies are too small for me. With my gift I should be going from Dan to Beersheba, you know. Big time deal.

He said, no man's gift is too big for God's principles. That commitment to the truth of the word of God concerning the New Testament assembly. I have to laugh when I hear people talking today and they they're arguing about whether the breaking of bread should be moved and all of this.

You know, if they had the breaking of bread four o'clock Sunday morning I'd still go, wouldn't you? Sure. It's a matter of principle to be there because the Lord is there. We need to know the truth of the faith.

We need to be convicted of those truths in our own souls. We need to be committed to those truths. Commitment seems to be sadly lacking in many areas of life today.

They take the easy way out. But I'll tell you the truth of the assembly is something precious and we want to be committed to it. We need enthusiasm about it.

Sometimes I think we suffer from an inferiority complex in this whole area. We're afraid to say anything about it instead of being enthusiastic about it. It's interesting to me to read so many current books and find men who are coming across these truths from the word of God and they think they're marvelous.

They think they're absolutely marvelous. I'd like to share some of them with you. He says, the layman, this man says, the layman must now cut the cords that bind the Christian faith to an official priestly class and universalize it once again.

They must give it back to the people, the people of God, the laity. The church at Antioch was founded by laymen, carried on by laymen and spread through that ancient world by laymen. It was a lay church.

That's important for the reconstruction of the church of today. The next great spiritual awakening is going to come through the laity. It's good, isn't it? You've been feeding in good pastures, this man.

He says, hitherto the center of gravity has been on the minister. Now the center of gravity has to be shifted to the laity. We ministers, missionaries and evangelists are never going to win the world.

That's true. That came to me. I forgot to mention that out in Honolulu that's what came to me.

The work of the ministry is for all to think and the world will never be evangelized the way God intended it to be as long as we have a clerical system. Now that's frank speaking but it's absolutely true. The world will never be evangelized the way God intended it to be as long as we have a clerical system.

And this man saw that. This man saw it. 20-20 vision.

We are too few to do it and if we could do it it wouldn't be good for it would take away from the laity that spiritual growth and development which comes through sharing one's faith. But, he says, we will never get the laity to take the responsibility for the Christian movement and it's spread by saying come and help the pastor. Their inner response and sometimes outer response is why should we? That's his job.

We pay him for that. They caught it. He caught it.

If we're really to get the layman wholeheartedly get him he must see and feel his own standing and responsibility in the Christian movement. I rejoice when I read these things. There's another one.

The laity on the whole and this is very much what David said this afternoon. The laity on the whole have been in the stands as spectators and the clergy have been on the field playing the game. If the clergyman kicks a goal or makes a touchdown he's applauded.

Good pastor. Hope he will stay. That set up must be changed.

The laity must come out of the stands as spectators and take the field as players and the clergyman must come off the field as players take the sidelines as coaches of a team. That fits in in a way with Ephesians 4. Perfect to the saints for the work of the ministry. Downgrading them? No.

Upgrading them. It's greater to be a coach than to be a player. Better to get ten men to work than to do ten men's work and so forth.

Good. Here's another one. A different author.

He says by clericalism and incidentally this is a very recent book, Keep in Step with the Spirit by J.I. Packer. He says by clericalism I mean that combination of conspiracy and tyranny in which the minister claims and the congregation agrees that all spiritual ministry is his responsibility and not theirs. A notion both disreputable in principle and spirit quenching in practice.

Those are strong words. May I read them again to you? By clericalism I mean that combination of conspiracy and tyranny in which the minister claims and the congregation agrees that all spiritual ministry is his responsibility and not theirs. A notion both disreputable in principle and spirit quenching in practice.

And then he goes on to speak about assemblies of people such as this one here in the church in Winston-Salem and he said they proclaimed the universality and the rightness of every member ministry from the middle of the last century on. But because their thesis was bound up with a reactionary polemic against trained and salaried clergy in supposedly apostate churches little notice was taken of it. And that's true.

Those early men cried out against this wretched system in apostate churches. And the world just passed it off. I say we need enthusiasm in talking about these things.

Not only in living the truth but in talking about it to others. Some years ago when Seattle was on its back economically a cult witnessed Lee and the little church movement moved 60 families into Seattle to found a local church. It was at a time when Seattle was so low that somebody erected a billboard at the edge of the city and it said with the last one out please put out the lights.

And at that very time witnessed Lee and their churches as they call them moved 60 families into a depressed area. And they have an auditorium up there in Seattle today that seats I believe 2,000 people. I don't say that they're filled every Sunday but they have an auditorium up there.

Why? They're enthusiastic about what they're teaching. It's not right but they're enthusiastic about it. We ought to be enthusiastic about the truth of the word of God.

It's a funny thing that we kind of move in a cycle. And as others are moving toward our position, we seem to move away from it. It used to be, and this is not too important perhaps, but it used to be in our assemblies that we would sit around in a circle with the emblem in the middle, a type of Christ being the center.

It was what you might call a circular church. Well, then we moved toward the fixed pews because the churches were sitting in fixed pews. And then all of a sudden I began reading in the magazines where church architects were moving toward a circular church.

And it seems to be kind of a circle that we're all going around in. We try to imitate and as we're moving away, they're moving back. I say we need enthusiasm in propagating these wonderful truths of the New Testament.

We need to know them. We need to know what we're talking about. We need to be convicted of their truth.

People can tell that when we're convicted of their truth. We need to be committed to them. And we need to share them enthusiastically.

And another thing that we need, we need to act upon them too. I don't believe that we are called to a ministry of sheep stealing. I don't believe that.

I don't see that anywhere in the New Testament. That we're called to go and steal sheep from other fellowships. But I believe that we can get before the Lord and present ourselves to Him, make ourselves available to Him, and then share the truths of the Word of God as He opens the door to us.

And I want to tell you, there are hungry people today. Really hungry people. We can use literature, such as the little booklet by Mr. McKay that I just mentioned.

Part of the problem is that we spread ourselves too thin. We spread ourselves in a multiplicity of parachurch organizations. And mind you, I don't want to wrap them because many of these organizations are doing a great work for God.

But they'll never take the place of the local assembly. Never take the place of the local assembly. And I want to tell you something.

I was just telling a young brother, you cannot be in a parachurch organization and declare the full counsels of God. You can't. I thank God for the Wycliffe Bible translations.

I thank God for the work they're doing. But you can't be with Wycliffe in many countries and for instance engage in evangelism or church planting. Because they signed a convention with the government that they won't do that.

And our young people should know that. If they're going out to do translation work, that's one thing. But their hands will be tied in many other ways.

I'll never forget something that G.H. Lang said in one of his books. He said, Everywhere the apostles went, they planted assemblies. Everywhere we go, we found missions.

Something to think about, isn't it? Everywhere the apostles went, they planted assemblies. Everywhere we go, we found missions. And I'd like to make an appeal in this connection for a great increase of exercise of souls concerning assembly planting, new assemblies.

There is a tremendous resistance among us to planting new work. You know why? We get so comfortable in our assemblies. We don't want to lose people.

We don't want to lose their financial support. And we enjoy their fellowship so much we don't want to lose them. And it's quite a problem seeing new assemblies planted.

Listen, if we really believe what we believe, we'll want to see more assemblies planted. We really will. Just by way of personal testimony, a few years ago, God guided some of us.

We were burdened about this whole matter. And three from one assembly and four from another assembly were praying about it. And we got together and found out we were praying about the same city.

The same city. And we got together and we started praying week after week, praying week after week. And God led, God led, so that an assembly was planted.

And God has given us such tremendous joy in that new work. You know, there are people in that work exercising gifts that were dumb priests where they came from. They were.

They were just sitting there doing nothing where they came from. And they're really moving forward for God today. Just think of it.

How sad it would have been. But there was a certain measure of resistance and we did not move until we had the fellowship of both assemblies that we came out of. We insisted that we would not move until we had the right hand of fellowship.

And I was out in Honolulu again in the courtyard of the Moana Hotel. There's a tree there. It's called a banyan tree.

The banyan tree grows up and then the branches come down and they send little tentacles down to the ground and wherever the tentacles touch the ground they take root. And I said, a parable of church growth. That's just what it should be.

You know, when you have a family and you raise, let's say, three daughters and they get to their teens or twenties and they want to go off and get married. What do you say? Oh no, look, we're having such good fellowship. We don't want you to go off and get married.

And we need your help in paying the mortgage too. We'd like you to just... You don't say that, do you? Listen, you're fools when they go off and start new families. Why shouldn't we be just as thrilled to see new assemblies be planted? To see some of our dear young people who have leadership qualities.

To see them developing. And incidentally, I don't advocate any new assembly unless there is efficient, strong leadership to go. It's true.

You don't want to send mere novices into it. But I just want to close this plea on my lips. I'm saying it everywhere I go.

Let's break out from this terrible inertia and encourage... Elders, encourage the planting of new works for the glory of God. So there it is. Parsley and oats.

Know what you believe. Go to the Word of God and get your convictions. Is this right? Or would you be just as happy in a denominational church? Be committed to it.

When you get divine principles, stick to them. Be enthusiastic about it. You don't have to be backward about it.

Read all the new books that are coming out. You'll find the principles there. One after the other.

And these men think it's the greatest thing since sliced bread. They think that they've discovered something. Really? And they're capitalizing on it and singing all the way to the bank as their books are being sold.

And then let's take action for the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. Thank you. I would just like to remind all those that are attending the conference that our session tomorrow morning starts at 830.

And anyone has any needs regarding housing, Charlie Baker or myself are available tonight to help you with that. I'm going to ask our brother McDonald to dismiss us in a word of prayer. And then after he has dismissed us, I would like to have the folks that are here in the aisle and the folks that are in the back to get up and go out.

And I'll ask some of our local men to pick up the chairs. The rest of you remain seated if you would until we get these chairs out. It'll make our going out a little bit easier.

Father, we just thank you with full hearts for today. For all that it has held. So much prayer went up for this conference and we believe that you have answered prayer.

We thank you for the wonderful attendance for your dear people whom we love in the Lord. We thank you for hearts that are aflame for Jesus Christ. Thank you for young people showing their interest by their attendance as well.

Thank you for the ministry of the word of God. For all that you've with which you fed us today Lord. We just pray that from this conference, great blessing will flow out.

Great blessing not only here in the south but to the far corners of the earth. We dare to ask this tonight. Dismiss us with thy blessing.

Take us to our several places in safety. And keep us oh Lord pressing toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. We pray it in his worthy name.

Amen.

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