

A Camp Meeting Church

In these notes I would like to explain the reason for our particular Sugar Creek camp meeting – how and why it came about. This will help those who participate to understand and appreciate just what these gatherings are.

A Brief History

Camp meetings have a great tradition in the Bible Belt of America and can be traced back to the Jewish Feast Day of Tabernacles. They were community gatherings at harvest time in the days when most everyone lived off the land. Those involved may have been of different denominations in the Christian faith, but at camp meeting time, they gathered to sing and preach a common faith of their different churches. After camp meeting, they returned home to their own communities, where they worshiped separately in their various churches. This is very different from the Feast of Tabernacles, where all the tribes were of one faith to begin with and returned to worship together in their own community. If the first century church had held such gatherings from Philippi, Galatia, and Ephesus, it would have been similar to the Feast of Tabernacles, with every participant of the same faith and of the same mind returning to their own community to worship in the same manner.

Bible Belt camp meetings obviously differ greatly from biblical times in many ways. One way is that the participants represent different churches as well as different communities. Such churches did not exist until the Protestant Reformation. Paul was the first to begin Christian churches in different communities of different religions and customs. Prior to Paul, the Christians were all of the Jewish faith of Judaism – the same religion and customs, though they had spread out into Judea, Damascus, and the uttermost parts. When Paul removed circumcision from Christianity, it was also removed from Judaism. This meant that Gentile Christians could not worship with Jewish Christians in the temple or the synagogues out in the cities of the world, because circumcision was required for participation in Jewish worship. It did not mean that Jewish Christians could not worship at all with the Gentiles, only that they must worship (in uncircumcision) as the Gentile Christians worshiped. Such un-kosher worship and fellowship would be very difficult for a kosher Christian. Any camp meeting in those days would be either kosher or un-kosher. Gentiles could not attend a kosher gathering unless they were circumcised, and Jews could not attend a non-kosher assembly unless they ignored the law of circumcision in Judaism.

Though the Pauline churches were in different communities where there were various pagan religions, they were all of the same household of faith, without any denominational differences. If Paul had gathered them in one place to worship together, they would have been many house churches in assembly – not many denominations in assembly, as we see in the Bible Belt today. Paul would personally visit these communities where the church met and teach them about their Christian faith, but they were just too far apart to have a camp meeting like we do today.

We see the Pauline practice of Christianity in the ministry of John Wesley, who, like Paul, removed his service from the religion of his birth and began churches which his religion would not certify. This meant that Wesley must appoint someone locally to guide these churches, which he would visit in his circuit – much like Paul. Since Wesley did not represent the public institutional church, he could not convey a title of ordination to those he left in charge of his home churches. This was the origin of lay preachers, as well as circuit riding preachers. The task had been given by Wesley, but only the public church could give the title. This same public church would not give the title to John Bunyan, but he preached without it and spent 12 years in Bedford Jail for preaching without a license. The Catholic Church had reserved the power to appoint all Christian servants – now the Anglican Church has likewise given itself all the power of ordination in church service.

The Protestant Reformation of the 16th century resulted in many denominations of Christianity, which came to America in Colonial settlements, where they became one people (politically) under a federal head. The Christian denominations prospered under the religious freedom given to them by the political law of the land. Each community would have a church of the same denomination as its founders. The larger communities and cities would have several denominational churches. The denominations began to produce other denominations, which in turn produced other denominations. We speak of these as different faiths of the same religion, or different faiths of the same denomination. Some reflect a new theology; some are reformed theology; some are liberal, and some are fundamental – that is, seeking to conserve the old ways. Some of these denominational faiths have enough in common that they can assemble together periodically for a service of thanksgiving to God, or to pray for rain or political matters, etc. They can assemble in common purpose for evangelism, where converts to Christianity then become members of the denomination or faith which they prefer.

When Wesley originally preached in colonial Georgia, his converts became Anglicans, like himself, but when he later preached in the fields and factories

of England, the public church would not accept his converts. Nor would they ordain pastors for them. They were called “cells”, and were pastored by laymen, because only the church could ordain a church and the clergy. Paul and Wesley would never have considered calling their many churches together for an evangelistic campaign. They considered the people they taught to be Christians, and therefore, they pastored and taught them as such.

American Evangelism

When we consider the ministries of Dwight Moody, Billy Sunday, and Billy Graham, we observe something new in Christianity at that time – preaching the Gospel to Christian church members to revive their church service or to get them back into the church life. These campaigns were nationwide, and sometimes worldwide. In the early days, before large churches and stadiums existed, they were mostly held in large tents or were open-air assemblies. They were attended by people of various faiths and denominations. They offered people the answer to life’s burdens and problems with an assurance of heaven in the life to come. Most converts continued in the same faith, or they joined the church or the denomination of their parents.

We see a big difference in evangelism now from that of the Pentecostal church in the first century. If a person converted to Christianity at Pentecost, his problems were just beginning; his life’s burdens could be fatal. His family circle would be broken, and his life shattered. His job would be taken away and members of his own family would become his enemies.

We see a difference in Paul’s day, where Gentile conversion meant leaving the religion of your childhood and of your parents and joining the Christian sect at a time when that religion was despised, versus a later time, when it ruled with respect as the preferred and legal (church) religion.

We also see a difference in Wesley’s time, when converts came from Christianity – not from pagan religions, as in the days of Paul.

There is a difference today in the Bible Belt, where converts come from many different faiths established upon the teaching of Wesley, Luther, Calvin, etc. The converts are joined to a local community church, where Christianity is practiced differently in each one, according to the doctrine of each particular denomination or church. The local churches only gather in unity to harvest converts. There is no unity in teaching and training them in the different faiths of the local church.

From Jonathan Edwards to Billy Graham, the revivalists do not represent a church which the converts will join. They leave the revived and converted to the local churches, which explains why local churches cooperate in these area wide

campaigns. Each particular church stands to benefit by obtaining new members and/or revived members. This also explains why Paul and Wesley were so different – they had to provide a church for converts to join. They also had to remain on the scene and disciple the converts in the faith.

Paul had to establish a local assembly and staff it with Christian leadership, because the local religion was pagan. Paul’s churches would also experience opposition, because the pagan religions would suffer financially, as they did with the Ephesians.

Wesley had to establish local cells and staff them with leaders, because the national church would not accept the converts, nor ordain leaders for them, even though the Christianity was the same. There was opposition, because the success of Whitfield and Wesley was hurting the national church.

This helps us to see how different the Church built by Jesus has become in 2000 years - also how Christianity has changed, both in faith and practice. Paul brought his Gospel to a household or a community. The Spirit of God changed the hearts, which changed the religious practice and worship of the people. The loss of family life and culture resulting from their conversion left the converts seeking each other for comfort, assurance, and support. They could no longer worship with their peers in pagan temples, and thus, a local church was born.

Local churches spread from Antioch to Asia and Europe. The first European church at Philippi was of the same faith as those in Asia and Palestine. There were no denominational churches in those days; even in Rome or northern Africa. All evangelism resulted in converts becoming Christians from different religions. That was nothing like today, when converts can keep their Christian religion after conversion.

All converts to Christianity were spiritual members of the same spiritual church. All local churches were of the same faith as another house church or community church. The only Christian resource materials were the epistles of Paul, and were equally applicable to all churches. Today we have different churches with different publishing houses, providing resources for Christian study for the churches of that faith, or denomination. This modern concept of the church as local, with a denominational distinction in faith and practice, is why modern evangelism sees no responsibility to establish a local church as did Paul and Wesley. The local church already exists, and the revived or converted become the responsibility of the local churches, while the evangelistic teams go on to the next metropolis to help them have more and better Christian church members.

Home Bible Studies

My Christianity began like Wesley (not Paul). I was born in Bible Belt Christianity, went to the church

of local faith and studied the Bible in denominational school. I used the Bible in evangelism to share my faith. Like Wesley, my heart was changed, and I tried to share the New Life of my heart. I loved the Bible and loved to teach it, and was able to kindle this love in others who wanted me to teach them. I became involved with a group of Christians who traveled to local churches for a weekend of testimonies. They were called Lay Witnesses, because none were ordained by the church and they only gave a Christian witness – they did not teach the Bible, but only testified to the new life which they had discovered.

When the church members and leaders saw the fruit of God’s spirit in the lives of the witnesses, many desired the same joy and peace for themselves. I taught brief Bible studies to the witnesses for inspiration, which was a new experience for many of them who had never heard a Bible study. Their churches had sermons from Bible verses, and Sunday Schools used denominational resource material – not the Bible. Before long, the witnesses were asking me to come to their church with a Bible study, which resulted in more interest in Bible study. The churches did not ask me back, but the people did, which meant that we met in their homes. Soon the people were asking for weekly or monthly studies, which we began and have continued until the present.

The home Bible study groups eventually became home churches, as the people were not being spiritually fed in the public church. I began a monthly circuit to these home churches which met weekly in homes or other convenient places. I taught a weekly study in the Birmingham area, which also became a home church, that later met where I live in the rural area of Sugar Creek. We began to gather the saints together about quarterly for fellowship weekends, much like the Lay Witness Missions which had begun the home churches.

The May and September assemblies were held at my home, where I had built a crude campground for tents and recreational vehicles. Here we held outdoor assemblies much like the old Brush Arbor days. The March and November fellowship weekends were held in rented public places in areas that were convenient to other home churches.

These home churches and fellowship weekends are now over thirty years old. Many of the original saints are still around, and many of the young adults have never known Christianity in a public church. None of these home churches are registered churches with religious privileges, but they are legal, because there is no law requiring a church to be registered. Neither have I registered my Bible teaching ministry among them. There is no institutional organization involved at all. There are no names and titles – just brother and sister, Christian and saint. There are no rites, rituals, or holy days observed.

Home Church

This is how the home churches of our particular fellowship began and how camp meeting became a church of many churches. It wasn’t planned - it just happened.

There is a trend to return to home schooling, because the public schools are a bureaucracy requiring too much time and money to operate, along with security and discipline problems, leaving little quality time for education. There is, likewise, a trend to return to home churches for exactly the same reason. The public churches often spend more time perpetuating themselves and church programs than Bible teaching and Christian education. Public churches seldom, if ever, teach *Christianity 101*. Instead, they teach *Churchanity 101*, followed by *Denominationalism 101*. We often hear of school graduates who are lacking in the basic “three R’s”, but church alumni are just as bad – maybe even worse. Most will flunk any test on Biblical Christianity.

When anyone seeks to home school, there are state laws to comply with, but when one seeks to home church, there are no state rules at all. The public school officials will often oppose home schooling because it affects their finances – not because they can provide a better education. The states provide funds to the schools based on the number of students; therefore, too many home schools could hurt the public schools. Likewise, officials of the public church will often oppose home churches because it affects their attendance and support. We experienced this opposition, because our home churches did consist of former public church members. However, original first century home churches were not made up of institutional church members. Neither did they have to answer to such church authority. They were all charismatic churches under the charismatic authority and leadership of the Spirit of God.

Since the institutional church claims church authority to ordain other churches, we have often had to answer church criticism regarding home churches and lay leaders. Sometimes a person was influenced by this authority to return to the public church, but for most, the benefits of home church outweighed any alternative.

Sometimes a family would leave our home church when they discovered that there were no plans to ever become a public church. Since many public churches have their origins in such assemblies, many thought that we were also planning bigger and better things. Some even asked when we would be a church, when we were actually very busy already at being a church.

The saints in our fellowship of home churches have used many places to assemble. We have met in homes, fire houses, YMCA community centers, etc. We do not believe that it takes registration on paper to

make a church, nor a steeple overhead to make a sanctuary. We do not believe that the church should promote church attendance with advertisement and entertainment. Rather, it should provide a place for believers to gather with spiritual food for hungry souls.

We believe the church should be underground with a focus on spiritual things, not listed by the Chamber of Commerce as a place to visit while in town. An underground church is not visible in a public way; it will not make the news. It will not belong to Who's Who or be a member of the *Greater Metro Ministerial Association*, for example.

The church which Jesus built is a kingdom within the hearts of the children of God. These children should be quietly about their Father's business, while being good and profitable citizens in the kingdoms of this world. They should be content with such things as they have. They should be provoking one another to love and good works; especially the Household of Faith.

We need a church in different localities, but not different churches, with different faiths and practices.

I hope this helps people to appreciate the home church, and to see how it provides a much better opportunity for Christians to live a spirit-filled life; a life under the control of God, not under control of the church.

The Christian Church

When we speak of the Christian Church today we must explain what we mean because it is not the same as in Bible days. A church is simply a congregation or assembly. It does not require the Christian Faith to be a church. Moses brought a people out of bondage and death in Egypt to be the Wilderness Church. But Jesus The Christ brought His church out of bondage, to death in Adam, to be the Christian Church.

We can define both the Old Testament Church of Moses and the New Testament Church of Christ by the Faith which they profess. But we must also see the inheritance which each possesses if we are to understand the difference.

The Old Testament Church was heir to the land that was promised to them as the many seed of Jacob, while the New Testament Church is heir to the Life promised to them through Jesus, the One seed of Abraham, which is The Christ.

Christians are heirs of promise, but not land, as Moses gave his church. Rather, they are heirs of Life, as Jesus gave to His Church. God is a Spirit, and Christ is a Life-giving Spirit. Every Christian is an heir to God, whose spirit they possess. It is not what a person professes that makes him a Christian. Rather, it's what one possesses.

The Spirit of God which Adam lost in the garden gave life to Jesus in the womb. The Spirit was lost again in ransom to release the dead from the tomb. The Spirit is given again to the New Testament Church for an everlasting inheritance.

Early Christians of the first century did hold fast to the faith which they professed. But they were known to be Christians by the inheritance of God which they possessed in their heart. Christians claim to possess the Spirit, which is the New Testament inheritance, but are identified by the faith which they profess rather than the treasure they possess in earthen vessels.

When the institutional church arrived in the fourth century, it identified itself with creeds and soon was known by its faith. Today, all churches are known by their faith and so are Christians. Not only are they identified by what they believe, but they are judged by what they believe.

One must have the Spirit of God within his heart to be an heir of The Christ and therefore be called a Christian. We may call the Disciples Christians when they followed Jesus before He died. But they were not quickened by the Spirit until Jesus rose from the dead. Now for the first time we can have a Christian Church (an assembly of Christians).

Conclusion

The inheritance of every Christian is Life and this Life is the (Spirit) Life of God. Being God Life, it is eternal - having the same nature as God.

Christians have something that non-Christians don't have. Simply stated, it is the Spirit of God, which is love and light. Christians have faith, but so do non-Christians. It is not *believing* that makes one a Christian, rather it is *receiving*.

Christians are the Family of God on earth. They should assemble in order to communicate with Divine siblings. Only in church activity can they bear each others' burdens and provoke one another to love and good deeds.

Christians are heirs of a Testator who died leaving them a treasure to possess. The Christian life is simply spending this inheritance every day.

Christians should walk in the light and live the love which they have received from God. This is easy when led by the Spirit - but impossible when the Christian seeks to conform to the institutional church and its doctrines of faith.

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