

Rebuilding the Church

A Discussion On Assembling Together

The purpose of this discussion is to explore how we, as members of the body of Christ, should gather together to fulfill all that the Lord has planned for us, both individually and corporately.

We will begin by examining the early church's perspective on this topic with a brief overview, then draw insights from the teachings of Derek Prince and Watchman Nee. Additionally, we will consider aspects they may have overlooked by approaching the concept of assembling together through a traditional Christian lens rather than a first-century, Spirit-filled Hebrew worldview—in other words, how Jesus, Peter, and Paul would have conducted church to produce the results they did. And then followup with a detailed account from Scripture and history of How First-Century Born Again, Spirit Filled Believers in Yeshua Understood Acts 2:42.

One of the main issues facing the church today is that most leaders are stuck in a church model—whether it be a house church, home or cell group, or a traditional Sunday service—that cannot accomplish what the church of the New Testament was able to do. Nor can it fulfill the main responsibility of leadership, which is to feed the sheep and equip the saints for the work of ministry.

Yeshua (Jesus) said in John 14:12, "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father."

Since this statement is true, it is also true that we, as a church, have fallen far short of the mark Jesus set for us. The only logical conclusion is that our methods have been wrong and, as Watchman Nee wrote, we must rethink the work.

If we come fully into our purpose then we will fulfill the Scriptures of not only John 14:12, but also:

- Mark 16:17-18 – "And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up serpents with their hands; and if they drink any deadly poison, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover."
- Luke 7:22 Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them."

Key Reference Scriptures:

Hebrews 10:24-25

"And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day (of the Lord) approaching."

Acts 2:42

"And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching (or doctrine) and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."

1. How Would a First-Century Believer in Yeshua Have Understood Acts 2:42?

- Since the early church was started amongst Jewish believers, and they were a part of every church in every city in the New Testament, they would have viewed the apostles' teaching as an extension or fulfillment of Torah—not replacing it, but revealing its full meaning through the Messiah, Yeshua.
- Acts 2:46-47 "And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved."
- 1 Corinthians 14:26 "What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up."
- Paul emphasizes that gatherings should be orderly and edifying, where believers contribute through worship, teaching, and spiritual gifts to strengthen one another.
 - * More on the First Century Assembly after the views of Derek Prince and Watchman Nee.

2. Teaching vs. Doctrine in Acts 2:42

- The Greek word διδασχρή (didaché) appears several times in the New Testament and can be translated as teaching or doctrine depending on the context.
- The Didache is also the name of a late first- or early second-century manuscript known as The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles. It serves as a church manual, offering ethical teachings, liturgical instructions, and guidance on church organization.
- In Acts 2:42, the context suggests that the early believers were continually learning from the apostles, making teaching a more natural translation.
- However, since the apostles were the keepers of Yeshua's doctrine, they were responsible for teaching and keeping sound doctrine, doctrine is also a reasonable choice.

3. Hebrew Equivalent of the Word Didaché

Since Acts 2:42 describes Jewish believers who had come to faith in Jesus (Yeshua), it is helpful to consider how this concept would have been understood in a Jewish context. Several Hebrew words correspond to διδασχρή (didaché):

- תורה (Torah) – Literally means "instruction" or "teaching." While often associated with the Law of Moses, Torah broadly refers to divine teaching and guidance. This is the closest match if we think of the apostles' teaching as God-given instruction.
- למוד (Limmud) – Means "learning" or "instruction" and is related to the idea of being a disciple (talmid). In Isaiah 50:4, the phrase limmudim (learned ones) is used for disciples.
- הוראה (Hora'ah) – Means "teaching" in a more general sense and is used in rabbinic Hebrew.
- מוסר (Musar) – Often translated as "discipline" or "moral instruction," this term is frequently used in Proverbs (e.g., Proverbs 1:2-3).

Given these options, Torah is likely the best Hebrew equivalent because it conveys both divine instruction and authoritative teaching—just as the apostles' teaching was considered authoritative for the early believers.

4. How should we conduct assembling together in the 21st Century?

- The last section will deal with the changes that are needed in our churches to accomplish Yeshua's (Jesus') goals for his church, his body.

What Assembling Together Looks Like:

How First-Century Born Again, Spirit Filled Believers in Yeshua Understood Acts 2:42

A first-century Believer in Yeshua (Jesus) would have understood Acts 2:42 through the lens of Jewish customs, traditions, and teachings of Torah, while also incorporating the new revelation of Yeshua as the Messiah and the church structure that Paul and other Apostles were teaching.

Since much of the early church was made up of Jewish believers, they would have likely viewed the apostles' teaching as an extension or fulfillment of Torah—not replacing it, but revealing its full meaning through the Messiah, Yeshua. Paul emphasizes that gatherings should be orderly and edifying, where believers contribute through worship, teaching, and spiritual gifts to strengthen one another.

1. Apostolic Teaching (Torat HaShlichim – תורת השליחים)

- The apostles' teaching would have been understood as an extension of Jewish Torah instruction, now centered on Yeshua as the fulfillment of the Scriptures (e.g., Deuteronomy 18:15, Isaiah 53).
- Early believers would have seen this as authoritative teaching, much like how disciples learned from rabbis, but now through Yeshua's appointed emissaries (shlichim – שליחים).
- It would have included explanations of Messianic prophecies, Yeshua's life and resurrection, and how Torah should be lived in light of the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

2. Fellowship (Chavurah – חבורה)

- Fellowship in Jewish thought was deeply communal, centered on shared meals, study, and worship.
- First-century believers would have gathered in small house groups (similar to synagogue study groups), engaging in discussion, support, and mutual care (Acts 4:32-35).
- The Hebrew concept of chavurah (a fellowship group) was common in Jewish communities and would have shaped their gatherings.

3. Breaking of Bread (Lechem u'Yayin – לקחם ויין)

- This phrase would have immediately reminded Jewish believers of the traditional birkat hamazon (blessing after meals) and the communal meals observed on Shabbat and holy days.
- The breaking of bread would have been understood both as an ordinary shared meal and as a remembrance of Yeshua's Last Supper (Luke 22:19-20).
- It was also connected to the Messianic banquet imagery (Isaiah 25:6) and seen as an act of unity and covenant remembrance.

4. Prayer (Tefillot – תפילות)

- Early Jewish believers in Yeshua would have continued in daily prayer, following the traditional Jewish prayer times (morning, afternoon, and evening – Shacharit, Mincha, Ma'ariv).
- They prayed in house churches, synagogues and the Temple (Acts 3:1), reciting Psalms, the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4-9), and the Amidah (Shemoneh Esrei).
- Their prayers would have included thanksgiving for Yeshua, intercession, and praise for the fulfillment of God's promises in the Messiah.

Meetings:

In the first century, during the time of the Apostles, house church services were quite different from modern worship services in terms of structure and duration. While we don't have an exact time length recorded, historical and biblical evidence suggests that early gatherings or assembly of Believers could be several hours long, possibly even lasting an entire evening or day in some cases.

Factors Influencing the Length of a House Church Service:**1. Setting & Structure:**

- Early Christians met in private homes (Romans 16:5, Philemon 1:2, Colossians 4:15), many went to Synagogue on Shabbat, and when in Jerusalem met in the Temple Courts
- Gatherings were intimate, including teaching, fellowship, prayer, worship, and the Lord's Supper (Communion).

2. Biblical Clues About Duration:

- In Acts 20:7-12, Paul held a gathering in Troas that lasted all night until dawn, during which Eutychus fell asleep and fell out of a window. Since Paul was scheduled to leave the next day, this would have been a special gathering.
- This suggests that meetings could extend for many hours, especially when an apostle was visiting.

3. Jewish Influence on Timing:

- Many early Believers were Jewish or God-fearers (Gentile believers) and followed Sabbath practices, which often included long periods of study and communal meals.
- The tradition of reading Scripture and discussing it at length carried over into Christian worship.

4. Elements of Worship:

- Reading and discussing Scriptures (Acts 2:42, 1 Timothy 4:13).
- Singing hymns and psalms (Colossians 3:16).
- Praying together (Acts 12:12).
- Celebrating the Lord's Supper as a full communal meal (1 Corinthians 11:20-34).

5. Flexibility in Duration:

- Unlike formal temple services, house churches had flexibility, with services shaped by the needs of the group.
- Some meetings may have been shorter, while others (especially on special occasions or visits from Paul) could last much longer.

House church services in the first century were much more intimate and informal than the services we attend today. These gatherings were centered around teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayer.

Meeting Places:

In the New Testament, Believers gathered in various places for worship, fellowship, teaching, and prayer. Here are the key locations:

1. Homes – The most common meeting place for early Believers was private homes.

- Acts 2:46 – “They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts.”
- Romans 16:5 – “Greet also the church that meets at their house.”
- 1 Corinthians 16:19 – “Aquila and Priscilla greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does the church that meets at their house.”
- Colossians 4:15 – “Give my greetings to the brothers and sisters at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house.”

2. The Temple in Jerusalem – The early Believers, particularly Jewish believers, gathered at the temple courts.

- Acts 2:46 – “Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts.”
- Acts 5:42 – “Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news.”

3. Synagogues – Early Believers Jews also preached and taught in synagogues.

- Acts 9:20 – Paul “began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.”
- Acts 18:4 – “Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks.”

4. Upper Rooms – Some gatherings happened in upper rooms of buildings.

- Acts 1:13 – The disciples gathered in an upper room after Jesus' ascension.
- Acts 20:8 – “There were many lamps in the upstairs room where we were meeting.”

5. Public Spaces – Believers also met and preached in open areas.

- Acts 16:13 – “On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer.”
- Acts 19:9-10 – Paul taught daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus.

6. Prisons – In some cases, worship and prayer took place in prisons.

- Acts 16:25 – “About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God.”

A detailed look at how these services were typically structured and what they involved:

1. Opening and Greeting

- Hospitality and Fellowship: The service would likely begin with a greeting and words of welcome, followed by the hosting of guests. Hospitality was a significant part of early Christian life, as seen in various New Testament references to sharing meals and fellowship (e.g., Romans 16:5, Acts 2:42-47).
- Communal Meals: The breaking of bread (often a communal meal, as seen in Acts 2:42) played a vital role in these services. It was an opportunity for bonding and for reflecting on the teachings of Jesus, which sometimes included a full meal before partaking in the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:20-34).

2. Scripture Reading and Teaching

- Reading from the Hebrew Scriptures (Tanakh): Since many early Believers were Jews, they would have read from the Jewish Scriptures, including the Torah and the Prophets, as well as the Psalms (Luke 4:16-21). These would be read aloud, and the group would likely engage in discussion and interpretation.
- Apostolic Teachings: The teachings of the apostles (e.g., Paul's letters) would also be read aloud and discussed. Paul himself often addressed gatherings in house churches with instructions and theology, and he might have preached for extended periods (Acts 20:7-12).
- In some gatherings, Paul or another apostle would lead a more formal teaching session focused on theological concepts, Jesus' life and resurrection, and how to live a Spirit filled life.
- Letters of Paul or other early Apostolic writings were passed around and read to the congregation. These letters were considered instructional and foundational to the developing communities of Believers.

3. Worship and Singing

- Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs: Worship through music was a significant part of the gatherings. Early church worship included singing psalms (from the Hebrew Psalms), hymns (some of which were likely original compositions celebrating Jesus' resurrection and identity), and spiritual songs (Colossians 3:16, Ephesians 5:19). These songs helped strengthen the faith of the believers and were a form of communal expression of worship.
 - In some homes, singing might be accompanied by simple instruments (although there is little detail on this).

4. Prayer and Intercession

- Collective Prayer: Early services involved times of communal prayer (Acts 1:14, Acts 12:12). This included prayers for the church, for those in need, and for God's kingdom to come.
 - They would also pray for the strengthening of believers and for God's intervention in their lives and in the spreading of the Gospel.
 - Intercessory prayer was a key part, where individuals would pray on behalf of others (1 Timothy 2:1-2).

5. The Lord's Supper (Communion)

- Breaking Bread: The Lord's Supper was a central element in house church gatherings. It was both a spiritual act and a communal meal.
 - During this time, the believers would eat bread and drink wine, symbolizing the body and blood of Christ (1 Corinthians 11:23-26).
 - This was an act of remembering Jesus' sacrifice and celebrating the unity of believers in Christ.

6. Prophecy, Tongues, and Spiritual Gifts

- The house churches or home groups was the place for Believers to learn their gifts and callings and to practice those in a safe environment.
- Use of Spiritual Gifts: Paul's letters, especially to the Corinthians, highlight the practice of using spiritual gifts in the gatherings (1 Corinthians 12-14). This included prophecy, speaking in tongues, and healing, in fact all of the gifts.

- If someone had a prophetic word (a message believed to be inspired by the Holy Spirit), they would share it with the group.
- Paul encouraged orderly worship, where all the spiritual gifts would be used to build up the body of Christ.

7. Fellowship and Mutual Support

- Community and Mutual Care: After the formal parts of the service, there was likely a time for fellowship—where members would spend time together, encourage one another, and discuss the day’s teachings. This was a time of mutual support, especially for the poor and marginalized (Acts 4:32-35). It was important for the community to care for one another’s physical and spiritual needs.

8. Closing and Benediction

- At the conclusion of the service, a prayer of blessing or benediction might have been given, sending the people out into the world with encouragement and strength for the week ahead. Paul often used closing blessings in his letters (e.g., 2 Corinthians 13:14).

Summary of a Typical House Church Service:

- Gathering & Hospitality – Welcome, sharing a meal.
- Reading & Teaching – Scripture and apostolic teachings.
- Worship – Singing psalms and hymns.
- Prayer – Collective prayers for the church and others.
- The Lord’s Supper – Communion as a remembrance of Christ.
- Spiritual Gifts – All the gifts including Prophecy, speaking in tongues, and healings would have been used as directed by the Holy Spirit.
- Fellowship – Encouragement and mutual care.
- Benediction – Closing prayer or blessing.

These gatherings were usually longer and more communal than what we might think of today, with the believers spending significant time together in teaching, worship, and fellowship.

In Summary:

Acts 2:42 describes an early Messianic Jewish community that remained deeply rooted in Jewish tradition while embracing Yeshua as the Messiah. They lived a life of Torah, community, and worship, now centered on the revelation of the Kingdom of God in Yeshua.

Below I’m including summaries of the teachings of Derek Prince and Watchman Nee. I respect both men. I sat for years, in person, under Derek’s teaching. I had the privilege to travel and be on Derek’s ministry teams in the 1970s.

I did not personally know Watchman Nee, but have been impacted by his writings and notes. When I first started teaching on Rebuilding the Church in the early 1970s, I was asked if I had read Watchman Nee, as my teachings were similar to his. I said the only book I have read is the Spiritual Life, but this encounter opened the door. I believe Watchman Nee’s ministry in the 1930s prepared the Chinese Church for the persecution ahead under the Chinese Communist Party.

I now have the honor of fellowshiping with Chinese believers. It has become a great joy to me.

Derek Prince on Christian Fellowship and Assembling Together

Derek Prince emphasized the importance of Christian fellowship and assembling together. His teachings highlighted several key points regarding gathering as believers:

1. Biblical Mandate for Gathering

- He often referenced Hebrews 10:25, which encourages believers not to forsake assembling together.
- He believed that regular fellowship was vital for spiritual growth, encouragement, and accountability.

2. Home Groups and House Churches

- He taught that the early church met in homes (Acts 2:46, Romans 16:5).
- He supported home groups or house churches as a legitimate expression of Christian fellowship, especially where traditional church structures were not feasible or effective.
- He believed in larger gatherings on Sunday morning and at other times.

3. Purpose of Gathering

- He emphasized that Christians should come together not just for social reasons, but for:
 - Worship
 - Prayer
 - Teaching
 - The operation of spiritual gift
- 1 Corinthians 14:26 "What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up."

4. Spiritual Authority and Leadership

- While he valued small gatherings, he also stressed the need for proper spiritual authority and accountability to prevent disorder, heresy, or division.

5. Flexibility in Structure

- He believed the New Testament did not prescribe a single church structure, allowing for different forms of gathering, including:
 - Traditional churches
 - Home groups or Cell groups

Conclusion

Derek Prince encouraged believers to gather in a way that fosters discipleship, sound doctrine, and mutual edification, whether in traditional churches or smaller home-based fellowships.

Key Points from Watchman Nee on Assembly Life

Watchman Nee wrote extensively on assembly life—the gathering and functioning of believers as the Body of Christ. His teachings emphasize the biblical pattern of the local church, spiritual unity, and the active participation of every believer in church gatherings.

1. The Importance of Meeting Together

- Watchman Nee emphasizes that assembling as believers is not optional but a command from God, referencing: Hebrews 10:25 – "Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is."
- Isolation weakens faith, whereas corporate gatherings strengthen believers through shared encouragement, teaching, and worship.
- The early church in Acts met regularly, both publicly and in homes, which serves as a model for Christian gatherings.
- Christianity is meant to be lived in community, where believers minister to one another—individualism is discouraged.
- Meetings should be Spirit-led, allowing for:
 - Prayer
 - Worship
 - The Lord's Table
 - The sharing of God's Word
- Breaking of Bread (The Lord's Table) – Watchman Nee saw the Lord's Supper as central to Christian assembly life. He emphasized that believers should partake regularly in remembrance of Christ (1 Corinthians 11:23-26).

2. Spiritual Fellowship

- True Christian meetings are centered on fellowship with Christ and one another, rather than just routine gatherings.
- Fellowship (Greek: koinonia) means a deep, spiritual sharing in Christ's life. It is more than socializing—it is an exchange of spiritual life and encouragement.
- The Holy Spirit plays a key role in uniting believers and guiding their gatherings, making them spiritually fruitful.
- Watchman Nee warns against superficial gatherings where Christ is not the center, emphasizing the need for Spirit-led interactions.

3. Church as the Body of Christ

- The church is the living Body of Christ, meaning each believer has a role and function.
- 1 Corinthians 12 – Paul highlights that no believer is unnecessary—everyone has a gift and calling to contribute.
- Watchman Nee warns against passivity in church life, where people merely attend services instead of actively participating.
- True church meetings should allow believers to exercise their spiritual gifts—whether in:
 - Teaching
 - Prayer
 - Encouragement
 - Service
- Every member has a function and must contribute to the edification of the whole (1 Corinthians 12:12-27).
- Instead of relying on a clergy-laity system, Nee encouraged every believer to function in ministry, whether in teaching, exhortation, or spiritual gifts (Romans 12:4-8).

4. Authority and Order in Meetings

- While meetings should be Spirit-led, they should not be chaotic— 1 Corinthians 14:40 – "Let all things be done decently and in order."
- Spiritual leadership and submission to God-given authority in the church are essential for maintaining order.

- He cautions against human control that suppresses the Spirit but also warns against disorderly behavior in meetings.
- Watchman Nee upholds the biblical model where elders guide the church, but all believers should seek the Holy Spirit's direction.
- He believed in spiritual leadership by elders, but emphasized that Christ alone is the true authority (Acts 14:23, 1 Peter 5:1-4).
- The church should operate under the leading of the Holy Spirit, avoiding human control over God's work.

5. Breaking of Bread (Communion)

- The Lord's Supper is central to Christian gatherings, serving as a time of remembrance of Christ's sacrifice.
- Communion is not just a ritual but an act of unity among believers, reinforcing their oneness in Christ.
- The early church observed the Lord's Supper regularly in homes (Acts 2:42).
 - Watchman Nee encourages believers to return to this simplicity, rather than making it a mere tradition.
- He warns against taking communion lightly, emphasizing the need for self-examination and sincerity (1 Corinthians 11:28-29).

6. House Churches and Simplicity

- Watchman Nee encourages small, intimate gatherings rather than large, institutionalized church structures.
- The early church met in homes, where:
 - Fellowship was personal
 - Worship was free
 - Believers could share their gifts openly
- He warns against excessive formalism, denominationalism, and hierarchy, which can hinder true fellowship and the Spirit's work.
- Churches should focus on Christ and the Word, not human traditions or rigid structures.
- Any group of believers can gather, worship, and function as a church, as long as Christ is the center.
- Watchman Nee emphasized the importance of local churches as the visible expression of the universal Body of Christ.
- He discouraged denominational divisions, urging believers to simply gather in the name of Jesus (Matthew 18:20).

Conclusion:

Watchman Nee's book *Assembling Together* calls believers to rediscover the biblical model of church life—one that is:

- Spirit-led
- Christ-centered
- Rooted in genuine fellowship

He encourages Christians to be active participants in their faith communities, emphasizing that assembling together is a vital part of spiritual growth and endurance.

How should we see it today in the 21st Century

The question for all of us is, what do we want to do today in our own gatherings?