

Some Observations About Church Attendance

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Attending church services is both the duty and the privilege of every saint. Throughout the history of the church there have always been people who neglected church assemblies. Even in the days of the apostles there were those who did not appreciate the value of assembling with other saints. Hebrews 10:25 begins, *“Not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some...”* Sadly, neglecting services is also *“the habit of some”* even today. The Hebrew writer had just said, *“And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works”* (v. 24), meaning that one of the purposes of local church assemblies is to provide a mechanism through which saints can be edified. By neglecting church services one neglects opportunities both *to edify others* and *to be edified by others*. The local church is a self-edifying body (Ephesians 4:16), but members lose this important peer-powered form of edification if they neglect church assemblies.

Of course, by neglecting church services one also neglects opportunities to honor and worship God. Church assemblies provide even *“uninformed”* people opportunities to learn truth and be converted. Paul told the Corinthians, *“And thus, the secrets of his heart are revealed: and so, falling down on his face, he will worship God and report that God is truly among you”* (1 Corinthians 14:25 — *Note that although Paul was discussing the exercise of miraculous gifts, the method of truth delivery does not change the truth that is delivered. Truth spoken from memory is just as true as truth spoken by immediate guidance. — See John 14:26 and 1 Corinthians 14:30-32 on the ability of a prophet to retain information. Peter wrote to remind saints of “the words that had been spoken” by the prophets, apostles and even by the Lord, 2 Peter 3:1-2).*

Neglecting church services also indicates a lack of appreciation for *the sacrifice of Christ* (Hebrews 10:29) and quite frankly, a lack of love for God. Loving God with all of one’s *heart, soul* and *mind* means putting Him first in all things (Matthew 22:37 + 6:33). Some people are offended when their love for God is linked to their attendance habits, but since loving God involves service and obedience to God (John 14:21-24; 1 John 5:3) and attending services is a command of God (Hebrews 10:25), then this is a logical connection. (*Note that the double-negative “not forsaking” equates to the positive command to assemble.*)

Due to the plainness of the language in Hebrews 10:25, some people have attempted to mitigate its force by arguing that the “day” to which the author referred was God’s judgment on Jerusalem and hence the verse has no

application today. While I agree that the particular *day* of this passage did represent God's judgment against the Jewish nation, I emphatically reject the notion that this interpretation nullifies the purpose and need for church assemblies today. Jesus warned in Matthew 24 of **two** different judgments: one that the people would be able to "see approaching" (Matthew 24:15-35) and one that was unforeseeable (vs. 36-ff). Whether a foreseeable judgment or an unforeseeable one, the fact remains that people had/have to be *prepared* for the consequences of whatever judgment they face (Matt. 24:42-44). The principle remains the same regardless of the particular judgment that is involved. Since the final judgment awaits us (2 Corinthians 5:10; Romans 14:11-12), and since we will be judged by the gospel standard (Romans 2:11), then we should do all that the gospel requires in preparation for that judgment. This obviously includes all instructions and obligations related to the New Testament local church.

The Church Assembly And The Lord's Supper

While there are many good and helpful things that Christians can do outside of the church assembly, certain things can *only* be done in that assembly. The *Lord's Supper* is to be observed by saints who "*come together*" upon the first day of the week (1 Corinthians 11:18, 20, 33; Acts 20:7; Acts 2:42 also describes events that occurred upon the first day of the week). We have no authority to take the Lord's Supper *outside* of a local church assembly. As a *memorial* and the "*communion of the body and blood of Christ*" (1 Corinthians 10:16) the Lord's Supper contains a very personal element. However, that personal experience is to be shared with others *in a church assembly*. It is also a "proclamation" of the Lord's death (1 Corinthians 11:26). In this context Paul meant that the members of the church make this proclamation *together in the church assembly*. Failure to observe this memorial robs the Christian of a unique spiritual blessing and constitutes disobedience to God. We should also note that failure to *scripturally* observe the Lord's Supper is equally damning (1 Corinthians 11:27-30).

By isolating Acts 20:7 from all other assembly passages some people have concluded that the Lord's Supper is the *only* reason for a church assembly. However, the assembly is also God's arrangement for instruction and admonition (*as noted above*, Hebrews 10:24). Though often overlooked, Acts 20:7 teaches that *teaching* is also a function of the local church. We are told that "*Paul preached to them and continued his speech until midnight.*" 1 Corinthians 14 teaches that *singing and prayer* are authorized in church assemblies and the first couple of verses in chapter 16 teach that *giving* is authorized in a first-day-of-the-week assembly. It should be noted that while the singing of spiritual songs, praying and teaching (Bible study) may also be done outside of a church assembly and on any other day, there is no Bible authority for observing the

Lord's Supper outside of a church assembly or upon any day other than Sunday. Neither is there any Bible authority for a church to raise funds by any means except through first-day-of-the-week contributions.

What If I'm Sick Or Feel Bad?

How "sick" is sick enough to justify missing services? How "bad-feeling" is bad enough to justify missing services? Well, ultimately God will judge these matters. I can't judge for you and you can't judge for me. Brethren must be very careful to avoid unjust judging of one another in such cases for it can lead to evil suspicions (1 Tim. 6:4). If someone tells me that they are too sick to attend services then I should simply believe them. If I later learn that they were able to do other things while missing services then I should admonish them and perhaps even rebuke them.

Of course, conscientious Christians want to be careful about such things and sometimes have legitimate questions about the extent of their obligations. One is obviously *too sick* or *feels too bad* to attend worship services if he/she is:

- Contagious (must be concerned for the well-being and safety of others, Matthew 7:12; Romans 13:10 — *"love does no harm to his neighbor"*)
- Mentally / physically incapacitated and miserable (fever, vomiting, diarrhea, head / body aches, surgeries...etc can prohibit a person from being able to participate in worship and or Bible study)
- Too sick to do other things (like work, go to movies, attend sporting events, play games, participate in sports or hobbies)
- Disruptive (because of discomfort from extreme pain, incessant coughing, excessive and uncontrollable sinus drainage clearing that would impair the ability of others to concentrate upon worship)

What If I'm Traveling Or Out Of Town?

As noted above, Christians have an obligation to assemble with other disciples (Acts 20:7; Hebrews 10:25) — to "come together" as a "church" (1 Corinthians 11:20, 33; 14:23, 26). In these assemblies we fulfill duties to both God and our brethren. Different local churches have different practices with regard to the number and times of their church gatherings. These decisions are made by the elders / members of each respective church and are matters of authorized liberty and expediency. For example, most churches meet on Wednesday nights for Bible study. While Wednesday (or other weeknight) gatherings are scripturally authorized, they are nowhere *bound* in Scripture. The elders (or members, when absent elders) of such churches decide whether or not such services are

expedient for their church. I have known churches to suspend Wednesday night services throughout winter months, particularly when they are composed largely of elderly Christians who live considerable distances from the meeting place and in areas that are dangerous to travel in bad weather. They commit no sin by suspending (or even cancelling) mid-week services. Some churches don't meet at all throughout the week and meet only upon the first day of the week. No sin is committed by this arrangement either, for they are still able to comply with the worship instructions contained in the above passages and worship God "*in spirit and in truth*" (John 4:24).

While churches may meet any number of times throughout the week for Bible study, prayer or singing, one gathering is absolutely required by Scripture: To be approved by God, a church must assemble at least one time each Sunday in order to worship God. Acts 2:42; 20:7; 1 Corinthians 11:23-25; 14:15, 26; 16:1-2 authorize *the Lord's Supper, preaching/teaching, singing, praying and giving* as approved acts of worship. The Lord's Supper and giving are limited to a first day of the week (Sunday) assembly and may not scripturally be done on any other day.

I regret that when I was a young Christian and preacher I failed to understand this difference, but there are two different sets of obligations in connection with church assembling. One is *local church membership*. The Christian has a special obligation to the local church of which he is a member. Acts 9:26-28 contains an approved apostolic example of local church membership based upon an agreement between Christians in a certain location to work and worship together. After becoming a member of the Jerusalem church, Paul was "*with them, coming in and going out.*" In order to have an *assembly* there must be agreement upon a *place, time and frequency* of meeting. There are actually several different areas where local church members must agree in order to operate a local church (*meeting place and times, number of gatherings each week, selection of elders and deacons, selection of preachers and class teachers, whether to own or rent meeting facilities, scriptural and best use of church funds...*). This **membership agreement is with one's own local church and not with other churches**. One might live in an area where there are several different local churches but local church membership obligates one to his own local church and not to other churches, whether near to him or far from him. One may *choose* to attend the services of other churches (gospel meetings, singings) when they don't conflict with his own services, but he has no spiritual *obligation* to those other churches. While it is good and profitable for Christians to support the gospel meetings of sound area churches they have *no spiritual obligation* to do so. I entered into no

membership agreement with the other churches around me. I have that arrangement only with the local church of which I am a member.

The other obligation relating to church assembling is *to God*. As taught in the above passages, whether traveling or at home the Christian has an obligation to God to assemble with saints upon the first day of the week for worship. As recorded in Acts 20:6-7, Paul was traveling when he assembled upon the first day of the week with the saints at Troas to observe the Lord's Supper and preach to them. Even though the traveller has no *membership obligations* to the church that he visits he can still fulfill his worship commitments to God by assembling with another church that practices scriptural worship.

Since Scripture only *authorizes* but nowhere *binds* non-Sunday meetings, and since traveling Christians have no membership obligations to other churches to which they have no membership agreement, traveling Christians may choose to attend the non-Sunday meetings of other churches or they may choose not to. Most Christians enjoy meeting with saints in other places but the point is that they have no spiritual obligation to do so. (*Note: Those who travel in the Bible belt during the Spring or Fall will likely pass by churches every night that are conducting gospel meetings — not just on Wednesdays.* It is hypocritical to bind upon Christians that they must plan their travel schedules around other church's Wednesday night services but *not* their other weeknight services! Why would one be spiritually obligated to attend another church's services on a Wednesday night but not on the Tuesday or Thursday nights of their gospel meetings? This is a purely arbitrary distinction. Traveling Christians have no more obligation to meet with those churches on Wednesday nights than they do any other night that they may be meeting. While it may be commendable for traveling Christians to consult the meeting schedules of these churches and coordinate their travel plans around those gospel meetings, they are not obligated to do so and we have no business binding upon Christians anything not bound in Scripture.

Some will argue that "if a Christian truly loves God he will meet with other churches on Wednesday nights when traveling." Those who make this argument must be prepared to accept the consequences of their argument. They will have to say that one does not love God if he doesn't attend the nightly gospel meetings of neighboring churches where he lives. They will also be forced to say that a traveling Christian does not love God if he does not plan his schedule around the gospel meetings of the churches that he may be traveling by! Again, while it is commendable for Christians to visit the services of other churches, they have no right to bind this practice upon others.

My family always does the best that it can to meet with other churches when traveling, including non-Sunday services, but we have no business binding our decisions and practices upon others.

Attendance Involves Planning

In order to have an “assembly” there must be a mutually agreed upon time and place. All sorts of preparations are made by several different people. Teachers study and prepare materials for classes, students prepare for their classes, the preacher prepares lessons and materials, worship facilities are cleaned and prepared, the Lord’s Supper is prepared and made ready for distribution...etc). This all involves planning and planning involves prioritization. We must determine to put the things of God above other things:

- When thinking of church services DO NOT think in terms of “IF” we plan to attend church services — Think in terms simply of attending — Plan to attend! The plan should be to attend, then if some uncontrollable circumstance arises THEN we must address it. We do not plan on the unforeseen circumstance that may potentially interfere.
- Some people have favorite but disagreeable foods that they (think) they can eat only on Saturdays due to their work schedules. They then develop digestive issues which affect them through Sunday morning. Eating food that one knows will prevent him from attending worship services is a failure to put God first. *Planning* to attend services may require forgoing one’s favorite meal on Saturday night!
- Some people engage in strenuous hobby activities on Saturdays knowing full well that they will feel too sore to attend worship services on Sunday morning. Again, this is a failure to put God first.
- Some people have hobbies that take them to remote places where they cannot attend worship services on the Lord’s Day (deer camps, cruises... etc). Such people fail to put God first.

What About Missing Church Services Due To Secular Work?

Even after doing everything within their power to avoid it, some Christians end up having occasional conflicts between work and service times. Both work and worship are required by God (John 4:24; 1 Timothy 5:8) and we must do our best to fulfill both requirements. Before judging brethren too harshly we must remember that reward structures are different with different types of jobs. Some jobs can easily be replaced with other jobs that involve less conflict with scheduled church services and there be no real consequence to the worker. However, career based jobs often include pension plans or other benefits that are

built into the job, making it much more difficult to replace. I have known many cases where Christians are in their later years and absolutely depend upon those benefits for their livelihood. I am content to let these conscientious Christians and God judge their situations. Christians must be very careful to avoid making uninformed judgments about such brethren. I have known cases where hard working Christians missed some occasional services, but never missed any for frivolous reasons. Whereas some of their sharpest critics were people who regularly missed services for the smallest of reasons and actually missed more frequently than the one missing for work. I don't judge the one and I don't judge the other. We can only judge in situations where people have abandoned the assembly (Hebrews 10:25).

Conclusion

God commands saints to assemble and there is more to the context than just verse 25 of Hebrews 10. Verse 26 warns against "willful sin" that results in us forfeiting the benefits of Christ's sacrifice. Verses 27-29 describe the possibility of one "treading" on Christ and counting His blood an unholy thing. And no, he isn't describing child molesters and murderers! He is describing *Christians* who fail to appreciate the sacrifice of Christ. Verse 30 reminds us that God is judging us and verse 31 warns us that it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. All of this in the context of Hebrews 10:25 which addresses the simple obligation of attending church services! Yes, attending church services is that important.

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