



"The Assembly of the Church"

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Is it necessary to assemble with the local church in order to be faithful to Christ? This subject is vital to the life of a Christian, believe it or not. In recent weeks, we've studied the church: what it is, when Jesus built it, and so on. We've learned that the church is not a building or a cathedral. It's not even a worldwide organization as we think in terms of human organizations. The Greek word that is translated into our English word *church* is the word *ecclesia*. It means *to call out an assembly or a congregation*. In our last study, *The Nature of the Church*, we saw that *ecclesia* refers to a spiritual assembly. That is, a relationship that exists between Christians and Christ, as opposed to the world. All who have been called out of the world and into a saving relationship with Christ Jesus upon faith in and obedience to the gospel (or in other words, believers who have been baptized into Christ for the forgiveness of sins) have been added to the church (**Acts 2:38,47**). All who are saved are members of Christ's body, the church of Christ.

When we talk about the church in that respect, we're not talking about a visible organization, but a spiritual relationship, concept or idea. Where the assembly or congregation of Christ becomes visible, you might say, is on the local level. That is, Christians who are called out of sin and into Christ then identify with a local body of believers who are bound together by faith to carry out the worship and work of the Lord in their sphere of influence.

The Bible speaks of nothing any larger than the local church but smaller than the universal church. In other words, we read absolutely nothing in the New Testament of the church being divided into denominations or varied groups based on different theologies and practices. Rather, Jesus built one church. Every local church in the New Testament was like the next in faith and practice because they were all planted by the pure preaching of the word of God, which is *the seed of the kingdom* (**Luke 8:11**). So, any kind of organization larger than the local church is unscriptural and thus, sinful. If I'm a Christian, I am a part of a local congregation of believers who autonomously function as a body to carry out the work of Christ in that place.

So far, when we use the word *church* in these two senses—the *universal* number of Christians in Christ and the *local* organization of believers bound to each other—we’re really talking about a relationship. But the scriptures also use the word to describe a literal assembly or coming together of local Christians for a definite purpose. Not a spiritual or conceptual assembly, but a literal assembly of people. The Bible places a great deal of importance on those assemblies, as we will see in our studies today.

In **Hebrews 10**, the writer is warning the church not to give in to the pressures of persecution and depart the faith. This assault on their faith was taking a toll on their commitment to Christ and the church.

Hebrews 10:23-25 “Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; (for he is faithful that promised;) And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.”

We’re going to discuss three scriptural reasons why it is so important for you to assemble with the local church. We know from our series of studies on the church that it is important to God. Every person who has been redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ is part of it, or else they’re not redeemed.

Acts 2:47 “...And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.”

So, there is no such thing as a saved person who is not part of the church. But what about the local church? Is it really necessary? Can I truly love God and be a faithful Christian without being associated with other believers in a local church? Can’t I serve Christ without having to attend the public worship assemblies of the church? I mean, after all, isn’t it true that the church doesn’t save, but it’s Jesus who saves? What really counts is having a personal relationship with Him, isn’t it? And I can have that without being part of the church, can’t I?

An increasing number of people think so today. Some say they love Jesus, but they’re opposed to “organized religion.” Or they say they don’t need the church to be a good Christian, by their way of thinking. What does the Bible teach about that? Friend, that may all sound good, but it defies everything the New Testament teaches about the church and living life in Christ Jesus.

Today’s text is an urgent passage from the book of **Hebrews** which we read earlier. It was a warning and an encouragement to persecuted Christians of the first century. Many Christians at that time were tempted to leave the faith of Christ and go back to Judaism because of the threat of persecution. This pressure was causing some to neglect the worship of the church. To grow weak in their faith and their resolve. The writer sets forth the superiority of Christ over the sacrificial system and priesthood of the Old Testament that they were tempted to return to. He encourages them to *hold fast to their profession of faith* in Christ and not to waver (**Hebrews 10:23**). He then tells them to *provoke each other to love and good works* (**verse 24**), and he tells them how in the next verse.

Hebrews 10:25 “Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.”

The word *forsake* means *to leave or abandon, to leave in a lurch*. The words *assembling together* come from the Greek word *episunagoge*, which may sound familiar to you. Part of that word appears in the English translations of the Bible as the word *synagogue*. Most Bible students are somewhat familiar with

a synagogue, which is a Jewish gathering or public meeting place for coming together for worship and the learning of the scriptures. There were synagogues in nearly every city in the first century. Paul found one in every city that he visited, and they were a central part of Jewish life, including the lives of our Lord and the apostle Paul. We find them going to the Jewish synagogues to teach quite often. So, it was a natural thing for Jewish Christians to meet together. In a synagogue, songs would be sung, congregational prayers were offered, and a *rabbi* or Jewish teacher would read and explain the Old Testament scriptures. Even a casual reading of the book of Acts shows that not only did the Jews meet in their synagogues, but Christians in this new age of the world continued this practice in their own assemblies, called out for worship and edification.

Interestingly, the Greek word used in **Hebrews 10:25** is *episunagoge*, as we mentioned, and the prefix *epi-* is included to distinguish this assembly from the common gatherings of the Jews, with which the audience of this letter would be familiar. In other words, this Christian assembly was of utmost importance. It was and is vital to the Christian life. The Hebrew writer says that some were neglecting the public gatherings of the church for worship, edification and fellowship, and were thus in danger of abandoning the faith altogether. He says that they were not to forsake these assemblies, but were to *keep coming together to exhort one another, and so much the more as ye see the day approaching*. This *day approaching* is most likely the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, which was soon to occur, but consequently is typical of another day that is approaching for us: when the judgment day of Christ will come upon the whole world and not just the Jewish nation of the first century.

So, these assemblies were then and are now part of the activity of each local church, and they are vital—I repeat, vital—to the life of a Christian. Let me remind you of three reasons it is necessary for you to assemble with the local church.

I. The Glorification Factor

We assemble with the church to glorify God. For one thing, the Holy Spirit makes it a commandment by inspiring the Hebrew writer to write what he did. It is simply wrong and disobedient for a Christian to willfully absent himself from the assembly of the church that he is a part of. Yes, it is for our own good, and yes, it is for our own spiritual warfare. But it is also an act of obedience to Christ.

Why do we come together? What we come together to do is of supreme importance. I cannot imagine why a Christian who understands the scope and purpose of the Christian life would NOT want to be a part of this assembly. The church comes together for one thing: to offer public worship to God. The Bible says that God seeks those who will worship Him in spirit and in truth.

John 4:23 “But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him.”

We’re told that the early disciples met *stedfastly* or regularly to worship together.

Acts 2:42 “And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.”

We find that the church at Troas came together *on the first day of the week*, the Lord's day—Sunday, to *break bread* or observe the Lord's Supper and Paul preached to them.

Acts 20:7 “And upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them, ready to depart on the morrow; and continued his speech until midnight.”

You may be saying, *well, I worship God too, in my own way. When I'm out there in that deer stand or drifting around in my bass boat surrounded by nature, or when I'm enjoying that beautiful, peaceful golf course, beach, or mountain...that's MY church.* A man once told me about a charitable work he was involved in and he said that when he gets involved in that charity, that's HIS church. Friend, that may be an individual's act of Christian service, and we should all be busy serving the needs of others. And I do love to enjoy nature and I appreciate the fruits of God's creative powers as much as anybody. I praise the Lord for His creation, but that is not the church. That is not what **Hebrews 10:25** tells us to do.

There are things that we can only do in the assembly of the church that God expects me to do. The Lord's Supper is not an individual activity merely between a person and God. Rather, in every single passage that teaches anything about the Lord's Supper, the Bible shows disciples coming together to commune together. It is a group activity. If I can willfully absent myself from that assembly, then it stands to reason that so can anyone and everyone else. Then, you would have no public worship. I am commanded as a Christian to be part of that.

I am also commanded as a Christian to give to the work of the local church, including the financial relief of needy saints.

I Corinthians 16:2 “Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come.”

The first day of the week is the same day that Christians came together to break bread. Even church historians testify to that fact. They were to treasure up their offerings for the purpose designated by the apostle. That was one of the things they did when they came together. Otherwise, Paul would not have stipulated that this be done so that no gatherings would have to take place when he came. They were to come together with their resources and do this. This is what the word *fellowship* is referring to in **Acts 2:42**.

We come together to sing praises to God and to build one another up through singing. Yes, you can sing whenever you'd like (**James 5:13**). Many who are Christians sing on a regular basis to the Lord. But there's also an element of singing that must be done together, in the church.

Colossians 3:16 “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.”

I Corinthians 14:26 “How is it then, brethren? when ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying.”

That word *psalm* refers to a *sacred song*. The church assembles to worship God and build one another up in song. You can't obey the Lord in those things if you're not an active part of a local congregation of fellow believers.

II. The Edification Factor

We come together to learn and be built up in the faith. The Hebrew writer said we are to *exhort one another*—that is, encouraging one another, spurring one another on, stoking the fires of zeal and commitment. You see, one of the focal points of the church's coming together is the teaching of God's word and the accountability that accompanies it. Think about that: leaders of the local church are called in the scriptures *shepherds of the flock*. How can your soul be shepherded/led and fed if you're not part of the flock?

The sad part is that many people divorce themselves from the local church because they really don't want to be shepherded. They don't want spiritual accountability. They don't want to be led in the paths of righteousness. Remember what Peter told the elders in his letter:

I Peter 5:1 “Feed the flock of God which is among you...”

If I am part of the flock, I've got to be with those who are placed in a position of shepherding my soul and the souls of others. You may be saying, *I'm not edified when I come to the services of the church. I'm not encouraged either*. Have you ever thought that you might be part of the problem? If you're a Christian and you're leaving an empty seat in the congregation, have you ever thought about the effect that that is having on the local church, on Christianity in general? Perhaps you are dragging others down. You're certainly discouraging the preacher. You are setting an example of apathy and indifference for others in the pews. Your involvement can be a spark that begins a much-needed revival.

III. The Association Factor

You need to assemble with the local church because if you are a Christian, you-by definition-are part of the church. You're just as much a part of it as anybody else if you're a baptized believer. You have as much responsibility to it as any other Christian. The church is described as *the bride of Christ (Ephesians 5:32)*. What does it say of one who says she loves her husband but she doesn't want to be his bride? Just as those who say they love Jesus but have no use for the church, the bride of Christ.

The church is also referred to as *the Lord's family (Ephesians 3:15)*. How can you be part of a family, but want no association with or participation in the affairs of the rest of the family? *We're members of His body* and the church IS His body (**I Corinthians 12:27**). How can you spiritually remain alive if you're detached from the body of Christ? What use is a hand, foot,

eye or ear if it's detached from the body? It cannot function alongside the body as an integral, productive part of the body if it's detached from the body. In fact, it can't have spiritual life apart from the body.

The local church is to be united and members are to *have the same care one for another (1 Corinthians 12:25)*. How can that be if you're not part of the local church?

People will make many excuses for not assembling with the church. *I don't have time, I'm busy. It's difficult for me to make it to the services of the church.* Stop and think about the fact that Jesus had time for you.

Matthew 6:33 **"But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you."**

It's really all about priorities. It's about deciding what is truly important in life: things of this world, of a temporal nature, or things that are spiritual in nature. Are you seeking the interests of not only yourself spiritually, but also the interests of the kingdom of God and its welfare, work, message and mission? Are you seeking all of that before anything else? You may say, *well, I've got to live my life. I have to make a living, raise my family and have some time for recreation, and this, that and the other. And I will do my best to make some time here and there for the work of the church.* Friend, you've got it all wrong. You've got to make sure that you put the work of church first. Part of that involves your active participation in the work of the corporate body. Your duty to Christ comes first, then allow all of these other things to take their rightful place.

Matthew 6:33 **"But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you."**

I'll tell you, if you don't put the kingdom of God first in your life, you're never going to get it in there. If Jesus Christ and living the Christian life and the work of the kingdom does not come first—before work, education, recreation, family relationships...—I'll assure you it won't come at all.

Some offer the excuse that there are hypocrites in the church, saying *I'm just as well off as they are*. Yes, there are hypocrites in the church. I hate to admit that to you, but there are hypocrites in the church. But that is not a new development. There always have been. There were hypocrites in the synagogue. How well we know that, because Jesus rebuked and condemned them. But that didn't keep Jesus or Paul from going to the synagogue. That didn't diminish Jesus' love at that time for the house of God.

You might say, *it doesn't do anything for me. I could go to worship, but it's boring. I'm not stimulated by it.* Think about this: maybe you've been going for the wrong purpose. You don't go to the house of the Lord to be entertained. We don't come to the assembly of the church to be catered to. We don't even assemble to be served, even though we derive some irreplaceable benefits from being there. We go not to be served, but to serve; to worship. What you get out of the worship largely depends on what you put into it and what kind of attitude you take with you when you go. To contribute to the worship, to engage your heart

and your mind in the singing of praise to God, in the prayers that are offered to God and all of the things that the church comes together to do.

I'm thankful that you watch this program. I'm glad you are here today, but this is not the assembly of the church. If you're a Christian, you have an appointment with the Lord and His people every first day of the week. I hope you'll keep that appointment.

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