

“Not Forsaking the Assembly...”

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Introduction

Brethren have some very unusual ideas about attending the assemblies of the saints. Many years ago, a member of the church where I preached at the time told me if I refused to perform the wedding for her daughter that her husband would likely never enter the church building again. I could not in good conscience perform the wedding due to the young woman’s previous marriages, so I did not. The threat of the non-attendance of the girl’s father, although he was a member of the church, was not all that worrisome. At the time his wife made the threat, I had been there two years and he had been in the building one time – for a funeral.

There is surely more to being a faithful child of God than regular Bible class and worship attendance, but can one be faithful to God while forsaking these and other such assemblies? Let us ask the pivotal question on this subject: “Is attendance of the church’s assemblies (including Bible classes, Gospel meetings, and other such assemblies) necessary?” By *necessary* I mean not merely in the view of preachers and elders, but in view of the teaching of Scripture. Is regular, faithful attendance necessary to please God and go to Heaven?

Members of the church may generally be classified into three groups according to their attendance habits:

1. There are those who are always present every time the church meets unless they are hindered beyond their control. When they are not present it is immediately assumed that they were in an accident, were ill, were out of town, or were otherwise prevented from coming. This group includes the elderly and infirm who once attended (and still long to attend) regularly, but who are no longer physically able to do so.
2. There are those who attend regularly on Sunday mornings (some worship only; others worship and Bible classes), but rarely any other time. Despite Scriptural teaching, pleading, and encouraging done by various ones, they resist all such efforts and cling to their “Sunday-only” habit. Every meeting besides Sunday morning is “optional” with these brethren.
3. There are those who have no pattern of attendance, but who come when they “feel like it” (and they usually do not) or when it is convenient (and it usually is not). They may show up one or two Sundays a month or less frequently. Most of the time they prefer to be somewhere else besides in the assembly, doing something else besides worshiping God, and with someone (or ones) besides the Lord and His people. Such brethren never give serious thought to attending a Gospel meeting, lectureship, or other assemblies or classes designed for God’s honor and their edification. They are not hindered by circumstances beyond their control – they **choose** not to come.

Obviously, this subject deserves more careful consideration than some have given it. Perhaps it deserves more frequent and serious attention by preachers in the pulpit and church bulletin and in personal visits and exhortations from elders.

The Obvious Importance of The Lord's Day Worship Assembly

The significance of the first day of the week – the Lord's day – is easily traced in the New Testament.

1. The Lord was raised from the dead on this day (Luke 24:1-7).
2. He appeared to the apostles for the first time on the day of His resurrection, the first day of the week (John 20:19).
3. He appeared to the apostles a second time "after eight days" from the first time, thus on the first day of the week (v. 26).¹
4. The church was established on Pentecost day (Acts 2:1, 37-42, 47), which always fell on the first day of the week. (*Pentecost* means "fifty days," referring to the number of days by which it followed Passover. Pentecost fell on the day following seven "sabbaths" [weeks] after Passover. Thus Pentecost is sometimes called the "Feast of Weeks" [Exo. 34:22; Num. 28:26; et al.]).
5. The church in Troas met on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7). (6) The church in Corinth met on the first day of the week (1 Cor. 16:2). (7) It is generally conceded that John's reference to "the Lord's day" (Rev. 1:10) is another term for the first day of the week.²

The Lord commanded His followers to eat the bread and drink of the cup of His supper (Mat. 26:26-27; et al.). As often as they eat the supper they are to do so as a memorial to the Lord's death (Luke 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:23-26). The time of partaking as demonstrated in Troas, with apostolic approval, is the "first day of the week" (Acts 20:7). The Galatian churches and the Corinthian church also met on the first day of the week, and when they did so they were ordered to contribute their money into a common treasury (1 Cor. 16:1-2). In this first-day-of-the-week assembly, the Corinthian church was observing the Lord's supper (albeit a corruption of it) (11:17-18, 20, 33-34).

All of the first-century congregations were taught the same things (1 Cor. 4:17), thus the conclusion is irresistible that they universally met on the first day of every week and that both the observance of the Lord's supper and the giving of their money were obligatory acts of worship in these assemblies. None can rationally or successfully deny the significance of the Lord's day, nor the obligation of every Christian to observe these two activities each Lord's day. To state the matter another way, when one willingly misses the Lord's day assembly, he

disregards the clear, inspired commands and examples that obligate Christians to partake of the Lord's supper and to give of their money in the Lord's day assembly. Thus far we have discussed only the significance of the Lord's day worship assembly to which the Lord's supper and the collection of money are specifically tied.³

Is It Important to Attend at Other Times Besides Once on The Lord's Day?

Here we refer to Sunday and Wednesday Bible classes, Sunday night worship, Gospel meetings, lectureships, and other such assemblies of the local church. Let us note first that other meetings besides once on the Lord's day were conducted with apostolic approval in the first century and are thus authorized by Scripture. The Jerusalem church for at least a time assembled daily: "And day by day, continuing steadfastly with one accord in the temple..." (Acts 2:46a). There is no indication that the assembly of the church in which the neglect of the Grecian widows was discussed was on the Lord's day (6:1-2). There was a prayer meeting at the house of Mary in Jerusalem "where many were gathered together" (12:12). We believe the evidence is strong that the Corinthians assembled not only on the Lord's day, but at other times as well.⁴ The approval of such meetings by the apostles implies their recognition of both the need and the importance of such.

It is doubtful that the church could fulfill its God-given mandate to preach the Gospel to the whole creation if it met only once on the Lord's day for worship. The ability to do the work of evangelizing the world implies knowledge of the Scriptures and spiritual strength and maturity, none of which are achieved without teaching, training, and edification beyond that which we can receive in only one meeting a week. Practical proof of this fact is seen in the congregations which, in the early years of this century, fell under the anti-Bible-class persuasion. Such churches have all but died for lack of concentrated teaching and training through which to edify and equip their members. Those who are members of congregations which conduct Bible schools, special training series, Bible lectureships, Gospel meetings, and other such spiritually enriching programs, but who neglect or refuse to participate in them, are always the weakest and least mature members therein. On the other hand, those who regularly take advantage of all such opportunities possible are generally those who are growing, developing, and maturing spiritually. It is beyond successful contradiction that other meetings besides one Lord's day assembly each week are both Scripturally authorized and important to the spiritual and numerical growth of the kingdom.

A Specific Command Concerning Our Assemblies

The context of Hebrews 10:19–31 contains an explicit and familiar negative command concerning our subject as its exact centerpiece. Verse 25 enjoins, “Not forsaking our own assembling together, as the custom of some is, but exhorting one another; and so much the more, as ye see the day drawing nigh” (Heb. 10:25). Before we analyze this passage, some attention to the context surrounding this powerful prohibition will help us to understand it more fully.

The great theme of the Hebrews letter is that of rescue and restoration. It was written to Jewish Christians who were on the verge of abandoning Christ and returning to Moses. The writer draws contrast after contrast between the superiority of Christ, His Word, and His church and the inferiority of Moses, the law, and the tabernacle/temple. The first nine and one-half chapters (through 10:18) are generally composed of persistent and persuasive doctrinal arguments to accomplish the author’s aim of exalting Christ above Moses. Hebrews 10:19 begins the hortatory section of the epistle, in which earnest and loving encouragements and exhortations are issued in order to preserve the faith of as many readers as possible. In verses 19–21, the writer distills the salient privileges to be found in Christ alone—boldness to approach God through the blood of Christ, a new and living way by which we are saved and in which we can live, and a great high priest in Christ Himself. Then follow three of the thirteen “let us” statements in the letter, which exhort the saints to be steadfast in their faith (v. 22), their hope (v. 23), and their love (v. 24–25).

In verses 26 and 27 the writer returns to his theme first introduced in chapter 6:4–8, that of the severest possible warning against the consequences of apostasy. Indeed, if there were not another word in all of the Bible on the subject of apostasy, either of these passages would be quite sufficient to demonstrate beyond doubt that a Christian can most certainly fall away and be lost. In fact, if this were **not** the case, the Hebrews letter (along with 1 Corinthians and Galatians, as well as portions of practically every New Testament document) would be all but superfluous. The “willful” sin of verse 26 is not merely one isolated act committed because one consciously decided to do so. If this were the meaning of the passage there would be no hope for any (we suppose that all, even the saintliest of saints, have at some time consciously done that which violated God’s will, knowing at the time that it would do so). When one has been thus “overtaken in any trespass” he can possibly be restored (Gal. 6:1). Such an one has not

undergone a new life-commitment to another religion or disavowed the faith but has had a momentary lapse.

In the context of the Hebrews epistle however, those who “sin willfully” are those who, in spite of their knowledge of and participation in the blessings to be found in Christ alone, still radically and stubbornly turn their backs on Him and His way to follow some other person or path. There is only one sufficient sacrifice for sins – not that of bulls and goats (Heb. 10:4), but “the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (v. 10; cf. 12, 14, 18). To turn back from that sacrifice (as the Hebrews were doing) left them with no sacrifice for their sins. Those who turn from Christ to Moses, or to **any other way in religion**, forfeit the only avenue of escape from the ravages and consequences of sin. This being so, they have chosen the destiny of fearful judgment from God that will bring upon them a fierce and devouring fire (v. 27). Verses 28–29 continue and intensify the idea of the deserved severe punishment of those who defect from Christ to Moses – “much sorer punishment,” as severe as it was, than those who transgressed Moses’ law. Such defection was tantamount to walking on the Christ as if He were dirt, counting the sacred blood of atonement as common, and despising the Holy Spirit. The just vengeance, recompense, and judgment of God will finally be poured out upon all such (vv. 30–31).

In the exact center of this discussion the prohibition of forsaking the assembly occurs. What is the connection? It seems rather obvious: Faithful attendance in the assemblies of the church would encourage deeper devotion to the Lord, provide opportunity for spiritual growth, and expose the Hebrew brethren to the holy exhortations of Christian fellowship. All of these elements are simultaneously reinforcements for steadfastness in the faith and bulwarks against temptation, trial, and defection. These early Hebrew saints faced ridicule and ostracism (and sometimes physical persecution) from their fellow-Jews still in Judaism. The appeal from them to come back with them to the old ways and ceremonies of Moses, a system to which their fathers had been bound for the previous 1,600 years, was extremely hard for some of the saints to resist. The first sign of defection would likely be the forsaking of the assemblies of the church.

What the sacred assemblies would do for those Jewish saints, they will likewise do for us in a world with a thousand siren songs, daily and persistently seeking to lure us to their destructive shores. One's attitude toward the church's assemblies continues to this day to be one of the surest measurements of spiritual strength or weakness.

Let us now read again and briefly analyze Hebrews 10:25: "Not forsaking our own assembling together, as the custom of some is, but exhorting one another; and so much the more, as ye see the day drawing nigh."

1. This is a strong proscription or prohibition, an explicit, negative command that cannot be misunderstood: **Christians must not forsake the church assemblies**. The statement carries the same force as "Thou shalt not murder," "Thou shalt not steal," or "Thou shalt not commit adultery" – "Thou shalt not forsake assembling together."
2. The command forbids one to **forsake** the assembly. To forsake is not necessarily the same as to be absent. While all forsaking will cause one to be absent, not every absence constitutes forsaking the assembly. *Forsake* translates *enkataleipontes*, which carries the idea of forsaking someone or something so as to abandon or desert him or it.⁵ One may be so ill, injured, enfeebled, or otherwise hindered beyond his control that he is unable to be in the assembly and is thus absent. However, he may long to be there and would be if he could be. His absence does not constitute forsaking the assembly. However, when one knows when and where the church assembles and is physically able to be present but chooses to be elsewhere, he has abandoned, deserted, and forsaken the assembly. It is such conduct that Hebrews 10:25 condemns.
3. Which assemblies are included? Some allege that this passage applies only to the Lord's day, and in our modern practice, particularly to the Sunday morning worship period alone. It is argued that "the day drawing nigh" is the Lord's day, and therefore the injunction in the passage applies only to the Lord's day assembly. However, it is most unlikely that "the day" refers to the first day of the week, as we will set forth below. Actually, there is absolutely no Scriptural basis for thus limiting this prohibition to any one day, whether the Lord's day or another. While we have seen from the Scriptures that the church most certainly met for worship each first day of the week, we also demonstrated that brethren assembled at other times for prayer, exhortation, worship, and edification. This proscription would most assuredly **include** the first day of the week meetings, but it is mere arbitrary opinion that **excludes** its application to other meetings of the church as well.
4. It was the "custom" (manner, habit)⁶ of some in the first century to forsake the assemblies of the church. Human behavior patterns vary little over the centuries, it seems. Unfortunately, this custom is still with us, often on a very broad scale. Although there are exceptions, the number who attend any given assembly of the church will be largest at the Sunday morning worship hour. The Sunday morning Bible study and Sunday evening worship number generally slips to seventy to seventy-five percent (sometimes less) of those present for the morning worship hour. The Wednesday evening attendance is usually even lower. The experience of this writer over a span of forty-five years of preaching is that all of the pleading, shaming, instructing, and exhorting that one might do will not change the behavior of many of these once-a-weekers. Like the card-carrying members of the \$1.00-per-week-contribution club, assembly-forsaking has been their habit for years, it is their custom now, and they will die in the same sorry rut. It is bad enough to fall into such, but it is far

worse never to do anything about breaking this routine. It would be interesting to know whether or not any of the Hebrew saints repented of this sin when they received this letter. Of course, some of them would not hear the exhortation unless someone brought it to their door; they would not be in the assembly to hear it read!

5. These were assemblies characterized by exhortation: The saints were **not to do** something (forsake the assembly), but rather they were **to do** something (exhort one another). It is therefore apparent that the exhorting under discussion here was not merely that which might be done as they happened to meet on the street or in the market or by visits in the homes of one another. The exhorting here is that which would occur in their assemblies, exhortation which they would forfeit if they forsook them. Albert Barnes has it right: "But exhorting one another. That is, in your assembling together – a direction which proves that it is proper for Christians to exhort one another when they are gathered together for public worship."⁷
6. Whatever *the day drawing nigh* refers to, it was an occurrence so clearly observable and understood by the readers that no further explanation was necessary. At least five different possibilities have been suggested to explain this day:
 - a. Some suggest the first day of the week (as mentioned above). However, in every other New Testament reference to this day it is clearly identified by far more than merely "the day" (Luke 24:1-7; John 20:19, 26; Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2; Rev. 1:10). This view has scant scholarly acceptance.
 - b. Some aver that the writer refers to the day of one's death. This view of the passage would, in effect, limit the command to only the terminally ill and the very aged, for they alone can in some sense "see" the day of their death approaching. However, the "day" in Hebrews 10:25 was apparently one that everyone could observe "drawing nigh" and that would come for all these Hebrews simultaneously. While saints in all age groups should live in the constant awareness that each day **could** be the day of his or her death, this hardly explains the explicit phrase, "**as ye see** the day drawing nigh" (emph. DM).
 - c. Some refer "the day drawing nigh" to the Second Coming of the Lord. Clearly, the New Testament refers to this final event of time as a "day" (Mat. 24:36; 1 The. 5:2; 2 Pet. 3:10; et al.). The constant anticipation of the coming of the Lord should certainly have the practical effect of producing watchful readiness and holy and godly living (Mat. 24:42, 44; 2 Pet. 3:11). However, the insuperable problem with this interpretation is that the time ("the day") of the Lord's return cannot be foreseen or determined (Mat. 24:36, 42, 44, 50; et al.). Since there are no signs by which to anticipate the day on which the Lord will return, the phrase, "as ye see the day drawing nigh," cannot refer to that grand and terrible event.
 - d. In the fourth place is the suggestion that "the day" is a reference to the Final Judgment which will be ushered in by the Lord's return. As with the Second Coming, this event is also described as a "day" (Acts 17:31; Rom. 2:5, 16; 2 Pet. 3:7; et al.). While we should all live in anticipation of and preparation for the great day of accounting, also as with the

Lord's return, the exact day of the Judgment cannot be foreknown, since it is triggered by the Second Coming.

- e. The fifth suggested explanation (and we believe the correct one) is that "the day" in Hebrews 10:25 refers to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Hebrews was likely written in the year 63 or 64, by which time some of the signs the Lord gave in Matthew 24:4-35 for recognition of the approach of that cataclysm were already apparent. While these Hebrews had obeyed the Gospel, they still had many and strong Jewish roots calling them back to Judaism (the problem that called forth this letter). "**The day**" when infidels would besiege the city, level its massive walls and buildings (including the temple, thus forever ending Moses' priestly/ sacrificial system), and slay or enslave hundreds of thousands of their fellow-Jews would be one of enormous tragedy, trauma, and significance to these Jewish saints. They would need all of the faith and spiritual stamina they could muster in preparation for that awful day. The exhortation they could receive (and give) in their meetings was crucial in producing the needed spiritual strength, thus participation in the meetings was crucial. This explains the strong, explicit negative command not to forsake the assemblies. Not only do we not believe that this command is in reference exclusively or even primarily to the Lord's day assembly, but we also doubt that the spiritual exhortation they needed for the crisis days they were facing could have been supplied by only one meeting per week.

"But how does this command relate to us, since the destruction of Jerusalem and the lingering outward features of Judaism occurred so long ago (A.D. 70)?" some may wonder. We certainly cannot appeal to that specific event in urging Christians to faithfulness in their assembling. However, the Lord's "coming" in judgment on evil men locally (as on Jerusalem) is typical of His actual Second Coming and Final Judgment of the ungodly (e.g., Sodom and Gomorrah-2 Pet. 2:6-9; Ju. 7). While we cannot know the exact day of the Lord's return which will usher in the Final Judgment (as the Hebrew saints could know concerning Jerusalem's destruction), the fact that these "days" will come is taught as certainly as any doctrine in the Bible. Therefore, we need to live in constant readiness for the coming of these "days," which are typified by the A.D. 70 conflagration. As did those ancient brethren in view of A.D. 70, we, in view of the promised sudden coming of the Lord and of the Judgment, need to be in every assembly. This powerful command not to forsake the assembly applies with the same force to us as it did to its original recipients, and **for the same reasons** – the exhortation and spiritual strength to be gained by them.

Some Other Passages That Apply to This Subject

There are far more statements and principles of Scripture that apply to the matter of faithful worship and Bible class attendance than space allows us to set forth. Among these are the following samples:

1. "But seek ye first his kingdom, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (Mat. 6:33). If the kingdom refers to the church here (and it does), then the Lord is commanding us to make His church the most important thing in our lives. When one compares his interests and priorities, the sober minded saint must ask himself where the church for which Jesus died ranks. If some attended their place of work with no more diligence and regularity than that with which they attend the various worship, exhortation, and study opportunities of the church, they would not be employed very long. If some students attended their public school or university classes as regularly as they do the assemblies of the church, would they pass or fail? Can one forsake the assemblies of the church at will and obey the command to seek the kingdom first?
2. "And Peter opened his mouth and said, Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons" (Acts 10:34). God has one set of spiritual laws for all. He forbids even one of His children to forsake the assembly (Heb. 10:25). This being so, He forbids **all of His children** to do so. Contrariwise, if He allows **even one** to forsake the assembly with impunity, He must thereby allow **all of us** to do so, since He is no respecter of persons. This conclusion would nullify any need for any assembly and is absurd on the very surface. Verily, God expects **all of His children** to be in every assembly and Bible class we can.
3. "[Christ] gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a people for his own possession, zealous of good works" (Tit 2:14). Note that those redeemed from sin and thereby purified as the Lord's own possession (Acts. 20:28; 1 Cor. 6:19-20) are to be zealous of good works. Are Bible classes and the various worship assemblies (including Gospel meetings, lectureships, etc.) – conducted according to the Scriptures, of course – "good" or "evil" works? If they are not good works, then they are evil works, and we dare not have anything to do with them (Eph. 5:11). However, if they are good works (which they most certainly are), then we are not at liberty merely to dabble in them or attend them at our whim. Rather, we must be **zealous** toward them!
4. "To him therefore that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin" (Jam. 4:17). Akin to the idea above, we assume that all will agree that to attend Scripturally conducted Bible class and worship assemblies is "to do good." This being so, one cannot escape the conclusion that one sins when he chooses not to participate in the assemblies of the Lord's church.
5. "As newborn babes, long for the spiritual milk which is without guile, that ye may grow thereby unto salvation" (1 Pet. 2:2). The most powerful urge an infant possesses is hunger for milk. The "spiritual milk" mentioned here is a reference to the Word of God. Just as we are to "hunger and thirst" after righteousness (Mat. 5:6) and "seek first" the Lord's kingdom (6:33), we are to "long for" the Word of God with the same passion an infant has for milk. Admittedly, we should do this on a daily basis in order to nourish our spirits properly. However, if one longs for – earnestly yearns to attain – all of the knowledge of God's Word he can, he will most certainly take advantage of all of the gatherings of the church in which the Bible is studied and expounded. This passage from Peter applies with special force to the Bible class opportunities on Sunday mornings and Wednesday nights.

6. "But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and for ever. Amen" (2 Pet. 3:18). These are the very last words that have been preserved from the pen of the apostle Peter. His statement emphasizes the duty of every saint to progress in God's favor and in the knowledge of His Word. One who is serious about obeying this inspired injunction will be in the Bible study and worship gatherings without fail when he is thus able.
7. "As the hart panteth after the water brooks, So panteth my soul after thee, O God. My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God: When shall I come and appear before God?" (Psa. 42:1). This Psalm powerfully expresses the eagerness lovers of God have to be in the presence of God and to worship God. Several other statements in the Psalms echo this thought (e.g., 42:2, 4; 84:1-2, 10). The principle should be evident: **Those who love God love to worship God.** This principle has been true from the beginning and will endure till the end. How obviously hypocritical is one who only haphazardly and spasmodically attends Bible classes and worship and at the same time boasts of his love for God! A Christian who forsakes the assembly is comparable in at least one respect to the Baptist preacher who "forsakes" the act of baptism as a requirement for salvation in his preaching and practice: Both of them fail to honor the clear command of the New Testament. The Lord said: "If ye love me, ye will keep my commandments. He that loveth me not keepeth not my words" (John 14:15; 24).

These words apply equally to saint and sinner.

Let us be brutally, but absolutely Scripturally, honest: One who attends Bible study, worship, Gospel meetings, and other such meetings only when it is convenient or when the notion strikes him **does not truly love God.** He only compounds his sin when, on the occasional time he decides to attend, he sings "Oh how I love Jesus." One who cares so little for the blood-bought bride of Christ and for the worship of God and His Son that he treats them with utter disdain **does not love Jesus,** regardless of how loudly he sings! True Christ-lovers will behave in harmony with that love, a part of which is faithful, consistent, regular presence in all of the assemblies of the Lord's people.

These passages, as well as literally hundreds of others, demonstrate the vital connection between a genuine love for God, for His Son, and for Their Word and one's attitude toward the Bible study and Worship gatherings of the church.

The Authority of Elders Relates to This Subject

Christians are obligated by Scripture to obey Scripturally qualified and appointed elders: "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit to them: for they watch in behalf of your souls, as they that shall give account; that they may do this with joy, and not with grief: for this were unprofitable for you" (Heb. 13:17). This statement does not give elders authority to

negate the teaching of Scripture or to add to the inspired legislation supplied in the New Testament. Instead, their charge is to supervise, lead, and protect the congregation of which they are stewards so that it remains within the limits of New Testament doctrine (Acts 20:28-29; 1 Tim. 3:5; Tit. 1:9-11). By implication they have the authority to determine and execute the activities that will carry out their God-given charge.

The bishops of a congregation are certainly within the purview of their authority when they plan Bible study periods and various assemblies for worship and exhortation, including the Lord's day assembly, to provide the instruction and edification necessary for the church to be spiritually mature and strong. In fact, elders are delinquent who do not make such provisions. Such is a major part of their responsibility. In turn, when they determine that a program of Bible classes on Sunday mornings and Wednesday nights, a second worship hour on Sunday, Gospel meetings, lectureships, and other such activities will be conducted, it is the obligation of members of the church to be present for these according to their ability to do so. Otherwise, they are not obeying and submitting to the elders who have been placed over the church by the Holy Spirit (Acts 20:28). In fact, when one decides to attend such assemblies only occasionally or whimsically, it is a sure sign of rebellion not only against the authority of the eldership, but against the Holy Spirit who commanded us to obey and submit to them. One treads on terribly dangerous territory when He forsakes the assembly.

Some Miscellaneous Implications of Forsaking the Assembly

In addition to the stated and implied implications of disregarding the importance of faithful worship and Bible study attendance already considered, we add some others. The forsaker:

1. **Expresses irreverence toward God and His Son.** These assemblies are in their honor and to their glory, but the forsaker does not care. He prefers the company of others to that of Deity. He demonstrates gross ingratitude for the spiritual blessing in Christ alone and for the abundance of physical blessing he has received from God. He shows contempt for the Word of God.
2. **Expresses disrespect for others.** To non-Christians and to children who may be watching (especially his own), his behavior declares that the church and all that it stands for are unimportant. He shows disrespect for the elders who have planned the assemblies. He shows disrespect for the Bible teacher whose class he should be attending. He evinces disrespect for the preacher who has prepared a lesson to glorify God and to edify him and the other brethren.

3. **Expresses unconcern for himself.** He is practically announcing that he is starving himself to death spiritually. (While one may achieve some spiritual growth by daily Bible study at home, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to find a “regular forsaker” of Bible classes and worship who ever does any Bible study at home.) He robs himself of strength for the hour of temptation and trial. He hinders his prayers for spiritual strength (if we can imagine such an one still praying) by rejecting a primary source of that strength.
4. **Makes recommendations to many people by his behavior.** By implication, he recommends to the new convert that he need not attend all of the Bible class and worship opportunities. He recommends to the just-restored Christian that he need not be concerned about being present for every gathering of the church.
5. **Believes in a double standard.** He would likely object to appointing a man as an elder or a deacon who forsakes the assembly. He would likely oppose employing a preacher who only attends when he wants to. He does not believe irregular and spasmodic attendance are characteristics of spiritual leadership, faithfulness, and maturity. How then does he rationalize his own slovenly behavior? Apparently, he believes there is one standard for him and another for others.

Fellowship and Forsaking the Assembly

Is forsaking the assembly a practice that is worthy of withdrawal of fellowship? It has become somewhat commonplace to hear some reply to this question, “Such brethren have already withdrawn their fellowship from the church, so it would be pointless (some would even say impossible) to withdraw from them.” This misses a major point of the issue, however. It assumes that the only area of fellowship is that which Christians have in the assemblies in their buildings. Indeed, there is fellowship when the church assembles, but is not fellowship involved in being identified on a broader scale with a local congregation, whether or not it is assembled? Thus the Philippians had fellowship with Paul when he was not even in the same city, much less the same assembly, with them (Phi. 4:14–15). There is also the element of being in fellowship with others that implies endorsement, approval, harmony, and unity (2 John 9–11). Such is indicated in Paul’s reference to the “right hands of fellowship” extended to him and Barnabas in Jerusalem (Gal. 2:9).

Paul’s statement to the Thessalonians is relevant to whether the church should withdraw from the impenitent assembly forsaker: “Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which they received of us” (2 The. 3:6). It is rather common knowledge that the word *disorderly* is translated from a term (*ataktos*) that “...was especially a military term, denoting not keeping rank, insubordinate.”⁸ The “disorderly” ones are those who are out of

step with the church and are insubordinate to both the elders and the Lord. What could be a more obvious sign of one's "breaking rank" in the Lord's "army" than to place one's personal convenience or preferences before the sacred duty and exalted privilege of assembling faithfully with the saints? Furthermore, what could be a more public display of one's disdain for things spiritual and eternal than such behavior? The Lord's people who are striving to be faithful have the Scriptural obligation to withdraw fellowship from such disorderly folk, so as to at least demonstrate the Scriptures' disapproval of their behavior, even if it fails to produce their repentance.

Conclusion

We have set forth some of the many reasons why we will continue to promote regular attendance at Bible study and worship periods in the local church. This writer has promoted such behavior all of his preaching life, and the more he studies the Bible the more convinced he is that to do otherwise would constitute spiritual treason against the kingdom of God. No worthy, logical, or Scriptural argument can be lodged against the practice of regular and consistent attendance. Likewise, no such argument can be lodged in favor of forsaking the assembly.

Many years ago the venerable and late Gus Nichols wrote a poem which condenses many of the principles involved in this subject. Although they especially pertain to the Sunday evening worship hour (counted "optional" by so many), they apply with equal force to such gatherings as Gospel meetings, lectureships, and other meetings planned for the glory of God and the spiritual enrichment of His people. We reproduce it below for your edification:

But Not on Sunday Night

I love the church that Jesus bought
And know that it is right.
I go there every Sunday morn,
But not on Sunday night.
I love to sing the songs of God,
Such worship must be right.
And this I do on Sunday morn,
But not on Sunday night.
I love to hear the Gospel, too,
It gives me pure delight.
I hear it every Sunday morn,

But not on Sunday night.
And may God bless our preacher, too,
And give him power and might.
And put a sinner in my place
At worship Sunday night.
I'd go through mud and even snow,
Do anything that's right
To be in worship Sunday morn,
But not on Sunday night.
It's true, the church can save the world,
If its good light shines bright.
I help it every Sunday morn,
But not on Sunday night.
Yes, all of us must one day die,
I hope I'll be doing right.
So may I die on Sunday morn,
But not on Sunday night!

Another poem, whose author I could not trace, penned the following pertinent lines relating to Bible study on Wednesday night (they apply with equal force to Sunday morning Bible study, as well):

Where Would I Be?

Where would I be on Wednesday night,
If my Lord should suddenly come?
In my class with the church, or out with the crowd,
Just having some "innocent" fun?
Where would I be, with the faithful and true,
Or at home in an easy chair?
Too weary, too selfish, or careless, perhaps,
To go to the house of prayer?
Where would I be, at the teachers' right hand,
And striving more Bible to learn?
Or watching TV on Wednesday night,
If Jesus should make His return?

Where would I be, getting food for my soul,
And praying for those who are lost?
Or absent again, forgetting the One,
Who bought me at infinite cost?
Where would I be? I've excuses enough,
But how would they look in His sight?
Where would I want Him to find me at last,
Should He come on a Wednesday night?

We will never be what God wants us to be and do what He wants us to do as long as we play at the job. It is obvious in every congregation that many, some who have been in the church for decades, are still playing at the job. One tell-tale sign is their ungodly, unconsecrated, sloppy attendance. Yes, there is more to being what God wants us to be than perfect attendance. But no one will ever convince this writer that the God Who gave His Son and the Christ who suffered Calvary for us can be pleased with less than perfect attendance when we are able. Those who do not count these matters to be serious do not know what things they should count serious. Those who do not appreciate plain Bible preaching on this subject will appreciate even less the Lord's evaluation of their ungodly habits at the Judgment. They should not get mad at the preacher. They should get mad at their own spiritual slovenliness and repent.

Those of us who are able-bodied can almost always do what we ought to do and being present for every meeting of the church for worship and study is one of the things we ought to do. If we do not have time to eat without missing Bible classes or worship, we can still be present and eat later without starving to death. If we can go to work and to school and other places when we have a headache, we can go to worship and Bible classes with a headache. If it is within our power to do so, we must arrange our schedules to be present when the church meets because we are a part of it and we love the Lord who owns it and us.

If the Lord had to depend on the once-a-weekers in attendance the church would die of spiritual dry-rot in a month's time. It is amazing how much He accomplishes through those who attend, give, and work faithfully. We can only imagine what He could accomplish if every member were not only faithful to the Lord in attendance, but in every other aspect of their lives as well.

Endnotes

1. All Scripture quotations are from the American Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.
2. In light of the emphasis in these passages, and in the absence of a single indication in the New Testament that the church ever was commanded to or did assemble for worship on the sabbath, the contention of the Sabbatarians that the sabbath was the church's day of worship in apostolic times is absurd.
3. It is not the author's intent to leave the impression that the Lord's supper and the contribution are the only (or even most) important acts of worship. Indeed, one aim of this chapter is to dispel the misconception of many "Sunday-morning-only" brethren, namely, that as long as they get to the building in time for the Lord's supper, this is all that matters—they have done their "duty." (Strangely, they do not have this same attitude toward the contribution.) Nor is it our intent to leave the impression that the other authorized acts of Christian worship (i.e., singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs [Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16], praying [1 Cor. 14:15], and preaching the Word [Acts 2:42; 20:7]) are not to be included in the Lord's Day assembly. It is rather our intent to emphasize for the moment those two acts (i.e., the Lord's supper and the contribution) that are tied explicitly to the first day of the week and every first day of the week.
4. Specifically, we believe the assembly described and regulated by Paul in 1 Cor. 14:26-40 refers to one distinct from and in addition to the ordinary first day of the week assembly. For our grounds for this thesis, the reader is referred to the author's article, "1 Corinthians 14:26-40 and Modern Assemblies of the Saints," *Contending for the Faith* 28 (February 1997):1, 19-24.
5. W. E. Vine, *Vine's Expository Dictionary of the New Testament* (Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1966 reprint), 2:126.
6. Vine, 1:263.
7. Albert Barnes, *Notes on the New Testament – Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1955), p. 237.
8. Vine, 1:320.

[**Note:** This MS was written for and orally delivered at the Southwest Lectures, Southwest Church of Christ, Austin, TX (April 11-14, 1999). It was also published in the lectureship book, *As for Me and My House....*"]

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