



God's call to public worship

The question of attendance at public worship is one that few of God's people consider with the serious thought that it deserves. To many, whether to be present at a place of worship or not is a matter of personal convenience rather than a duty that God has laid upon them. In Hebrews 10:19 the Apostle Paul begins the practical section of this epistle. He is beginning to apply the glorious doctrines he has given an exposition of. He has presented Christ as the substance of Old Testament shadow, v1. The Lord Jesus is the great High Priest of His people Who was symbolised and foreshadowed by Aaron and the Levitical priesthood of Old Testament times. Christ is come to be the mediator between God and men as the High Priest of His people. More than this, Christ is presented as the once for all atoning sacrifice for the guilty. The Old Testament age was one of continual sacrifice yet none of those sacrifices could effectively deal with sin *for it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins*, Heb 10:4. Christ has come, however, to make *one sacrifice for sins forever*, v12.

Such doctrines have practical implications in the lives of those who embrace them. The gospel which Paul expounds from Old Testament typical teaching makes a practical difference in the life of the believing sinner. It is of the greatest significance that before the writer has gone six verses into the practical application of gospel truth he addresses the matter of God's people assembling for public worship. In fact, this is the very first practical application he makes of the gospel truths he has proclaimed!! Evidently the matter of public worship is one very closely linked to the doctrines of salvation. The issue of which place of worship to attend is a separate subject — a subject that the Scriptures give very clear instruction about. The subject in hand here is the principle of attendance at public worship, a principle that is clearly laid down in these words.

I A PROPER REGARD FOR PUBLIC WORSHIP ARISES FROM:—

1. An understanding and appreciation of what believers have in Christ.

Paul's words in v25 are vitally related to his words in v19-21 — *Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, By a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh; And having an high priest over the house of God...* What the believer possesses in Christ is the basis of the Holy Spirit's command not to forsake the place of public worship. In Christ we have two things:

- a) a blood sacrifice** that secures for us entrance to the very presence of God. The guilt of sin is fully dealt with. *By one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified*, v14.
- b) an High Priestly mediator**, v21 Who represents us before God. Such a mediator is necessary to approach God and this need is satisfied in Christ. Just as there was no access to God in the Old Testament but through the High Priest so now in a higher sense we only have access to God through Christ.

Together, the blood of Christ and His mediation for sinners as their High priest secure for believers the benefit of full access to, and communion with, God. The matter of secured access to God lies at the basis of public worship. It is a pointless exercise without such guaranteed common ground with God. If we understand and value what Christ has purchased for His people at greatest cost then there will be a careful exercise of the privileges His people enjoy



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through His death and mediation. One of those privileges is public worship.

2. Obedience to the three commands of v22-24.

In v25 Paul speaks of the assembly of the saints as a matter that is linked to three commands that follow on from what we have in Christ. The duty of public worship is linked to the following commands.

a) Draw near..., v22 — The public assembly of the saints is one of the ways God has appointed for His people to draw near to Him. In the place of public worship we may meet God and experience His presence in a special way. In Matthew 18:20 a special promise is recorded in relation to the public assembly of saints. Christ states *where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them*. Here is the smallest public gathering possible and yet the Saviour is personally present. In such a context we draw near to God. In John 20:19 and again in v26 the disciples activities on the first and second Christian Sabbaths are recorded. We find them assembled together and it is recorded that Jesus Himself came and met with them. When the Apostle John saw His vision in Revelation 1 on the Lord's day (v10) he saw the Saviour in the midst of His churches symbolised by the seven candlesticks, Revelation 1:11-13. In each of those local assemblies of saints the Lord was present in a special way. It is true that God may be met with in private. The individual has a duty to go aside in private devotion but that private duty does not replace public worship.

b) Hold fast..., v23 — A profession of faith is held unto and proved by a diligent attendance in the house of God. In v26ff Paul indicates that the wilful disobedience of God's command in relation to the assembling of ourselves together, i.e. an abandonment of God's house, is an evidence of apostacy, a giving up on what was professed, and therefore that there is no true salvation. This is a very serious matter indeed. Careful and diligent attendance at the public assembly of saints to worship God is an evidence of saving faith. A willful and deliberate abandonment of this practice is evidence of one who is not saved at all. John makes this point in I Jn 2:19, *They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us: but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us*. He is referring to false teachers who had separated themselves from the assembly of God's people. Their withdrawal from the assembly of God's people was part of the evidence that they were not part of the Lord's people at all. A similar truth is taught in Jude 1:19, *these be they who separate themselves, sensual, having not the Spirit*. One evidence of not having the Spirit of God — and so not being saved at all — is a separating oneself from the assembly of God's people. The saving grace of God always moves the believer to fellowship with those of like precious faith. Those converted on the day of Pentecost *continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers*, Acts 2:42. Paul gave evidence of his conversion by immediately seeking out the company of saints in Damascus, Acts 9:19 and again in Jerusalem, v 26. The apostle is speaking in these serious terms of those who forsake, or abandon, the house of God. He is not speaking of occasions when it may be legitimate to be absent through sickness or other circumstances beyond our control. When such circumstances prevail the Christian will be absent but always reluctantly and to their sorrow.

c) Consider one another..., v24 — Our duty is to stir ourselves and others to *love and*



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good works. Paul is speaking of a responsibility to encourage ourselves and others to go on with God. This is the effect of Biblical public worship, this is its direction and focus. Public assembly of the saints is therefore in fact a means of grace and edification. A consideration of the good of other believers will bring us to the house of God. This is not a matter for merely selfish decisions! We serve God and His people by attending the house of worship. This is referred to again in v25, *exhorting one another* — 'to comfort, encourage'. See the parallel to the work of the Holy Spirit as the Comforter. Here is true spiritual activity! In Heb 3:12-13 Paul had commanded, *Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God. But exhort one another daily, while it is called To day; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.* This duty is fulfilled in part by attending the house of God. In Romans 1:12 Paul expressed a desire to meet with the saints at Rome. Part of his reasoning was that both he and they would be *comforted* — the same root as appears in the word *exhorting*, Heb 10:25. By assembling with them both he and they would be strengthened in the faith.

It is impossible to fulfill the duties outlined in v22-24, i.e. to draw near to God, to hold fast in the faith, to edify other saints; impossible to honour Christ as He ought to be for what He is to His people, without being diligent in the place of public worship. Carelessness about the duty to assemble with God's people for public worship leads to disobedience of God in other areas and shows contempt for Christ.

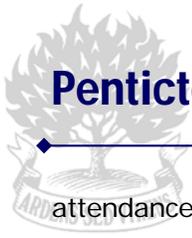
II GOD'S COMMAND V. MAN'S CUSTOMS

Attendance at the place of public worship is a clear command of God. Paul indicates that to obey God in this matter will bring us into conflict with the *manner* of some. The 'habit' or 'custom' of some is to rebel against God and forsake/abandon public worship. This is not an absence forced upon the individual by some impassable obstacle but a decision without legitimate reason not to be in the house of God.

Absence from the place of worship can become a habit, a custom, a way of life. What may begin as a forced absence has often become habitual. Such a habit has a widespread hurtful influence for others begin to follow the example that has been set. Paul has to warn against following the lead of those who neglect the house of God! How easily the sinful practices of men are introduced into the Church of Christ and become the custom! Sadly, the customs of men often count for more than the command of God when it comes to spiritual matters. Our attitude ought to be like the apostles in Acts 5:29, *We ought to obey God rather than men.* Many Christian parents in absenting themselves from the house of God have seen their children grow up to neglect the house of God entirely. Jotham, King of Judah, in the main did what was right before God but sadly, showed disdain for the Temple — *he did that which was right in the sight of the LORD...howbeit he entered not into the temple of the LORD,* (2 Chronicles 27:2). Scripture records that his son Ahaz, a wicked wretch, *gathered together the vessels of the house of God, and cut in pieces the vessels of the house of God, and shut up the doors of the house of the LORD, and he made him altars in every corner of Jerusalem,* (2 Chronicles 28:24). Ahaz's wicked behaviour is linked to his father's dislike of the house of God.

III ATTENDANCE AT THE HOUSE OF GOD IS URGED BECAUSE OF THE COMING DAY OF GOD.

In the light of the coming day of Christ's return believers ought to be diligent in their



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attendance at public worship. This is true for two reasons:—

a) We will give account on that day.

In every matter of Christian duty there is the underlying thought that we must give account to God. Yet here, that thought is explicitly stated. The Christian is to live seeing the approach of the day of God and he is to act in the light of what he sees.

b) That day is preceded by a time of great apostacy.

The nearer we come to the day of Christ the greater will be the sin of the world. In such an atmosphere it becomes even more imperative that God's people assemble for their mutual encouragement and edification. The pressures upon them will be increasing. Resistance to godliness will rise. Departure from God all around us is a motive for more careful obedience of God, Ps 119:126-127, Mal 3:16. Diligent attendance at the house of God is the answer to deadening apostacy. Sadly, many who profess to be the Lord's are influenced by the coldness of the age and neglect God's house.