

The Assembling of the Saints

By David Phillips

Many Christians believe that the assembling of the saints is important, yet there are also some who believe that it is not entirely necessary. It is no secret that there is a great influence in the church today that seeks to deemphasize the value of the assembling of the saints. One could easily write several articles refuting the many excuses that Christians have given for neglecting their responsibility to assemble. Instead, this lesson will focus on those Scriptures that show the kind of emphasis God places upon the assembly of His people and how the church in the New Testament approached this subject.

As we will observe in this lesson, the importance of Christians coming together is seen throughout the entire New Testament. But the passage that perhaps places the greatest emphasis on the assembling of God's people is Hebrews 10. The Hebrew writer not only stresses the importance of assembling together, but he also shows that the assembling of the saints is part of God's divine purpose. The verse that many people turn to when studying this subject is Heb. 10:25, but we would be selling ourselves short if we jumped straight to this passage without first understanding its context.

Vs. 22, *"Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of the faith."* Throughout the book of Hebrews the superiority of Jesus Christ is emphasized time and again. Most importantly He is portrayed as our great High Priest through whom all blessings flow. In the Old Testament, the Levitical priests would draw near to God whenever they stood before the altar to offer sacrifices. But we are told in Heb. 10:1 that what they did back then was merely a shadow of the good things that we now have in Christ. The Hebrew writer goes on to say in Heb. 10:11-14 that while those priests stood ministering daily, Jesus came and offered Himself for sins once for all and that through Him we are perfected. Now, unlike the priests of the Old Testament, we do not draw near to God with the blood of animals, but by the blood of Jesus Christ. Jesus has consecrated the *"new and living way"* by which we have access to the Father. It is with these truths in mind that the Hebrew writer exhorts us in Heb. 10:22, *"Let us draw near with a true heart and in full assurance of the faith."* Because of what Christ has done, we have the ability to approach our heavenly Father as His children.

Vs. 23, *"Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering."* Those who approach God by that new and living way have the hope of eternal life in heaven. We confess that hope when we come to Christ through obedience to the gospel. Eternal life in Him is the object of our hope. Because we have Christ as our Savior and High priests we must strive for that hope without wavering.

Vs. 24, *"And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works."* In spite of the fact that some Christians claim that they can serve God just fine by themselves at home, God tells us otherwise. The Christian faith is not a selfish one wherein we care only for ourselves. On the contrary, Jesus said that people would know that we are His disciples when we show love for one another (John 13:35). In 1 John 5:7-11, John says that our relationship with God is dependent upon our love for our brethren. Thus, our interaction with our brethren is just as much a matter of salvation as obeying the gospel itself. When we couple Heb. 10:22 with vs. 24, we are expected to understand that we draw near to God, in part, by showing consideration for our brethren, by striving with them to stir one another up unto love and good works. There is not space enough to cite all of the passages in the New Testament that emphasize the necessity of this truth, but take a moment to consider Eph. 4:1-3, Rom. 12:9-13.

Let us understand the point. If our salvation is important, if our need to draw near to God is important, if love is important (which all of these things are), then according to Heb. 10:24 so is the assembling of the saints! If there are some who still fail to see the significance of this, then please consider the New Testament church, which we have for a pattern of how and why God's people are to come together. For just as much as Heb. 10:20-24 interlinks the assembling with God's plan of salvation, so the rest of the New Testament illustrates that relationship.

The Togetherness of the New Testament Church

From the establishment of the church in Acts 2, God shows us a pattern of togetherness that cannot be overlooked. Believers understood the need to come together as it says in Acts 2:42, *“And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship...”* (this is spiritual fellowship, not food and folly fellowship that is so popular today). In Acts 2:44, *“Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common.”* In Acts 2:46, *“So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house...”* In Acts 5:42, *“And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.”* Notice that they were together on a daily basis. This is in contrast to today where it is difficult enough to motivate many to assemble just once a week.

Together in Need and Encouragement

Among Christians today it is commonly believed that the only real reason that the church comes together is to eat the Lord’s Supper and that any other assembly is superfluous. However, those who believe such a thing surely do not know the Scriptures, for we see example after example where Christians assembled together simply because they understood the value of togetherness and the strength that they were able to gain from one another. In Acts 4, after Peter and John were arrested and then released, we see the Christians in Jerusalem coming together for prayer and comfort. *“And being let go, they went to their own companions and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them. So when they heard that, they raised their voice to God...”* (Acts 4:23, 31). After Peter was freed from prison by an angel in Acts 12:5-12, he went to a house where there were many Christians gathered together praying for his wellbeing. After Paul’s first missionary journey, when he arrived back in Antioch, we see the eagerness of the church to hear about the work of the Lord, for it says, *“Now when they had come and gathered the church together, they reported all that God had done with them”* (Acts 14:27).

Together in Dealing with Offenses

It is no secret that Christians struggle with sin. Therefore, in addition to strengthening and encouraging one another, we also see in the New Testament that Christians joined together in their struggle against sin (Gal. 6:1-10), and if a member in a congregation chose not to repent of his/her sin, the church was to deal with those offenses when they came together. In Matt. 18:15-17, Jesus teaches on how to deal with offenses between brethren. If a man wrongs his brother and does not repent when his fault is brought to him by the man or by two or three witnesses, then the matter was to be taken before the church. In 1 Cor. 5:4-5 Paul instructed the Corinthians in how to deal with a man who was guilty of gross immorality. Thus he wrote, *“In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together...deliver such a one to Satan...”*

Together in Worship

The above examples provide a pattern for the kind of attitude all Christians should have toward the necessity of the assembling of the saints. But we must also understand that within God’s commands concerning worship there is an inherent need for Christians to assemble together. We have seen several passages where the church prayed together. In 1 Cor. 14:15-17 Paul provided instructions for prayers offered when the church is assembled together.

In Eph. 5:19 and Col. 3:16 God commands that we *“speak to one another”* and *“teach and admonish one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs...”* If we are to do these things toward “one another” then obviously it is necessary for us to assemble together.

When New Testament Christians ate the Lord’s Supper, in every account they assembled together to do so. In Acts 20:7 it says, *“Now on the first day of the week, when the **disciples came together** to break bread...”* In 1 Cor. 11 after Paul had corrected the error of the Corinthians and instructed in them in the proper way to eat the Lord’s Supper, he then commanded them saying, *“Therefore, my brethren, **when you come together** to eat, wait for one another.”* Finally, in 1 Cor. 16:1-2 we see Paul’s command for the church in Corinth to have a collection on the first day of the week. It only makes sense that in order for there to be a collection more than one party must be involved, once again necessitating the assembling of the saints together in one place.

In light of all of these passages we must conclude that it is impossible for Christians the truly worship God in spirit and in truth without assembling with the saints.

Down to the Facts

The reader will observe that we have discussed many passages which stress the importance of the assembling, but only two of those passages actually mentioned the first day of the week: Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2, which deal with the Lord's Supper and the collection for the saints. This is not to deemphasize the need for the Lord's Day worship, but rather to emphasize the fact that the church in the New Testament came together on days other than Sunday and that their need for coming together extended far beyond just taking the Lord's Supper. Yes, Christians are required to assemble together to worship God as we have seen in the previous section, but contrary to the tradition that has developed in our culture over the years, the Bible does not command that Christians assemble on the first day of the week only. Rather, the New Testament teaches us the importance of being present any time and every time (according to ability) that the church is assembled together.

What the assembling of the saints is not. One reason for people's unwillingness to attend all of the assemblies of the saints is a misconception concerning the purpose of the assembly. Some believe that the assembly is some sort of religious mass. But it is not a mass. It is not a religious ceremony with processions and chants where the "clergy" bless the "laity." Neither is the assembly a sacrament nor does it consist of sacraments. Religions that use the word sacrament use it to refer to things which they believe to bestow God's grace or forgiveness. Things commonly believed to be sacraments are the Lord's Supper, baptism, saying certain chants, etc. Sadly, there are many in the church who only attend one service per week because they believe that is all they need to receive God's grace. Many believe that it is only necessary for them to eat the Lord's Supper. Therefore, once they have fulfilled that requirement, any additional worship services or Bible studies are completely optional. But that simply is not true, and it is not the reason God has commanded His people to assemble together.

What is the assembling of the saints? It is the act of God's people gathering together to fulfill God's will for His church. The word translated "assembling" in Heb. 10:25 refers to a continual action which occurs whenever the church is called together, regardless of the day or time. Though assembling is not a source of forgiveness, there is much to be gained from the assembly by way of edification, encouragement, learning, and the ability to worship and honor God.

Why are the saints to assemble together? In the New Testament churches assembled together to accomplish any aspect of the work which God has given for her to do. Churches assembled to pray for certain needs (Acts 12:12), to hear about the work of God (Acts 14:27), to deal with offenses (1 Cor. 5:4), to teach and to learn from God's word (Acts 2:42; Acts 5:42), to stir one another up unto love and good works (Heb. 10:24), and to offer up worship to God (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2; Eph. 5:19). These are all things that Christians ought to seek to do at every opportunity for the sheer joy of serving their Lord and Master.

Contrary to the belief of many, to be able to say "I was there" is to completely miss the point of the assembling. As Jerry Parks put it, "...we see that the assembly is not an end to itself. Assembling with the saints is simply a means to an end. Just "being in attendance" is not the desired goal. Using this opportunity to grow, to enrich one's faith, to join with others in those things we know from God's word to be acceptable forms of worship to Him and to help others to enhance their faith, is the purpose of the assembly" (*Assembling With The Saints, Jan. 5, 1978*)

When are the saints to assemble together? Throughout the New Testament we see the Christians assembling any day of the week, and in some passages every day of the week (Acts 2:46; 5:42). Two passages in the New Testament mention the first day of the week, and those passages deal specifically with the Lord's Supper (Acts 20:7) and the collection (1 Cor. 16:2). Some have claimed that since only the first day is specifically mentioned it is the only assembly that is required. On the contrary, when Heb. 10:25 says, "*And do not forsake the assembling of yourselves together...*" it does not mention any day specifically. Rather, the word "*assembling*" refers to any and every time the church is assembled together. Thus, we must conclude that those passages that mention the first day of the week are not designed to limit the required assemblies of the saints, but to regulate in which assemblies the church was to eat the Lord's Supper and take a collection.

The days and times that churches meet together are left completely to the discretion of the local congregation. If one congregation agrees to meet twice on Sundays, and on Tuesdays and Thursdays, then that is when it will meet. But another congregation may decide to meet once on Sundays, then again on Wednesdays and Fridays. The

important thing is not when the church assembles, but that it does assemble, and when the church is assembled every member strive to be present as ability allows. That is a commitment we make when we place membership at any congregation.

Is one assembly more important than another? This is a strange question, especially in light of everything we have studied thus far, but it is one that many people have asked. If we are to simply look at how Christians dress for the different assemblies, it is evident that many Christians emphasize one assembly over the others. But when we look at the Scriptures we do not see a distinction from one assembly to the next. As mentioned before, the Lord's Supper and the collection are commanded for the first day of the week, but does that make the assembly or assemblies on Sunday more important than any other day? The Scriptures don't teach that. The assembly of the saints is still an assembly, whether it is on Tuesday, Wednesday, or Sunday. Therefore to regard one as more important than another is to disregard the New Testament pattern.

When You're Not There

In spite of all that the Scriptures say about the assembling of the saints, there are many Christians who are very unfaithful in their attendance. What these Christians need to understand is that their absence does more harm than they may realize. Their actions affect not only their own spiritual wellbeing, but also that of every other member in the congregation. The church is the body of Christ, and Christians are individually members one of another (1 Cor. 12:27). When Christians assemble together as a body, they are able to *"stir one another up unto love and good works."* But when one of the members of the body is absent, the effect is exactly the opposite. Your absence does more to tear down and discourage your brethren than to stir them up.

When one misses because of sickness or unpreventable circumstances, it is understandable and the rest of the congregation can pray for their wellbeing and look forward to seeing that person well again. But when one is absent simply because he/she would rather be doing something else, what a blow that is to their brethren who care so much about them. What a blow it is to Christ to see the disregard one has for His tremendous gift. It is no wonder the Hebrew writer describes it as trampling the Son of God under foot (Heb. 10:29).

When we choose not to assemble with the saints whenever they are together, we fail to honor God through worship (John 4:24). Therefore we sin against Him (Heb. 10:25). We rob ourselves of opportunities for spiritual growth (Heb. 10:22-24). We are choosing convenience over conviction (Acts 24:25). We are certainly not putting God first (Matt. 6:33; 16:24). In light of all of this, do we truly believe that God is still pleased with us when we show such blatant disregard for all that He has done for us?

Conclusion

The assembly of the saints is a wonderful gift from God. When we come together as a church we are able to be encouraged and to gain strength for holding fast the confession of our hope. Though we feel overwhelmed in the world, God provides a means for us to be lifted up in Christ through the assembling of the saints. On top of all of that, when we come together we are able to worship and glorify our God with those who have a like precious faith with us. Those who understand the benefits of these things make every effort to be present when the church is assembled.

Sadly, there are many who manifest extreme disregard for the commands and the blessings of their God and their Lord and Savior. Dear brethren, please reconsider your values. Think of the commitments you made when you were buried with Christ in baptism, and consider where it is that you are laying up your treasure. God has given us great things through Christ and in the church, but if we continue to trample those things under foot for the sake of personal recreation and pleasure, one must wonder what the Lord will have to say to us when we come before Him at the judgment.

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