

## Is it Our Moral Obligation to Attend Church?

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For the Record

This regular feature is an attempt to provide an elementary Biblical analysis of various topics in Christian theology and practice. We anticipate that this and future contributions will be helpful in explaining fundamental theological issues to those who may be relatively unfamiliar with them.

Attending church is far from being the chosen Sunday activity for most people in our culture. This should not surprise us, of course, when those who sleep in, go to work, or find other recreations in the place of attending church are unbelievers. Unregenerate hearts do not seek God or find pleasure in worshipping Him. what is surprising (and dismaying) is that today many professing *believers* *also* neglect the corporate worship of God.

Why is this? On the one hand, some Christians see church as just one of many personal options along with Sunday brunch, the ball game, etc. On the other hand, some Christians consider informal fellowship groups or Bible studies an adequate replacement for church attendance. But all Christians must be open to the teaching of God's holy word, and it is to this standard that we turn for an answer to our original question.

## Old Testament Law, Piety, and Prophets

The Mosaic *law* commanded God's people to gather together for corporate worship and the hearing of God's word (e.g., Deut. 12:5-12; 31:11-12). Indeed, the law of God required that the weekly Sabbath in particular be a "*holy convocation*" (Lev. 23:3). Regardless of outward circumstances (e.g., seventh-day Sabbath, a localized central tabernacle), the worship required in the Old Testament law entailed the basic moral element of assembling with God's people to hear His word and praise His name.

The religious *piety* of the Old Testament saint was evident in his desire to "Render unto Jehovah the glory due unto His name, bring an offering, and come before Him; Worship Jehovah in the beauty of Holiness" (I Chron. 16:20; cf. Ps 96:8-9). The believer is eager to worship in the midst of the assembled people of God. David the Psalmist wrote, "*I will declare Thy name unto my brethren; in the midst of the assembly will I praise Thee*" (Ps. 22:22). "*I will give Thee thanks in the great assembly; I will praise Thee among the people*" (Ps. 35:18; cf. 116:12-17). Many of the psalms emphasize the fact that David worshipped along with a congregation of other believers (e.g., Ps. 42:4; 55:14; 122:1; 132:7).

David's inspired testimony shows that his desire for congregational worship is normative for all God's people, He declared to all believers; "O come let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before Jehovah our Maker" (Ps. 95:6), "Come before His presence with singing...Enter into His gates with thanksgiving, and into His courts with praise. Give thanks unto Him and bless His name (Ps. 100:2,4), "Let them exalt Him also in the assembly of the people, and praise Him in the seat of the elders" (Ps. 107:32). "*Praise ye Jehovah, Sing unto Jehovah a new song and His praise in the assembly of the saints*" (Ps. 149:1).

Old Testament *prophecy* likewise shows us that those who are true believers will desire of assemble with God's people to hear His word and praise His name in congregational worship. For instance, Isaiah the prophet indicated that converts to the Lord would join themselves to the corporate worship of God's people in "*Jehovah's house of prayer*" (Is. 56:6-7; quoted by Jesus in Mark 11:17).

One of the burdens of Malachi's prophecy was that the corrupt worship among the Jews of his day would, in the future age of God's advent, be replaced with pure worship among the Gentiles in every place (Mal. 1:11; 3:3-4).

Therefore, the *law*, *piety*, and *prophecy* of the Old Testament all combine to point us to our moral obligation to gather together with God's people for worship.

"But that was the *Old Testament*, with its Jerusalem temple and seventh-day Sabbath," someone might complain. This complaint diminishes the full authority of God's inspired word. Referring to the Old Testament, Paul taught "*every scripture*" is inspired and is profitable for...instruction in righteousness? (2 Tim. 3:16). Of course, changes from the covenantal administration and foreshadows of the Old Testament to the redemptive realities of the new Testament must be recognized (much of the book of Hebrews serves this very purpose).

Nevertheless, Jesus obliges us to submit to the continuing validity of "every jot and tittle" of the Old Testament (Matt. 5:17-19), and Paul teaches that "whatever was written previously in the Old Testament was written "for our instruction" (Rom. 15:40. In that light, we would naturally expect that the moral obligation of corporate worship which is taught in the Old Testament will continue into the New. God continues to call a people for himself in the New Testament, and God surely continues to be worthy of their praise.

## The New Testament Normative Example

Regarding the Old Testament Sabbath, New Testament believers confess that Jesus Christ is "the Lord of the Sabbath" (Mark 2:28). In the New Testament age, it is thus appropriately called "the Lord's day" (Rev. 1:10). Scripture shows that since the Lord's resurrection, this day has been changed from the last to the first day of the week.[\[1\]](#)

Regarding the Old Testament temple, New Testament believers confess that they themselves now constitute "*the temple of God*" wherein God's Spirit dwells (1 Cor. 3:16-17; Eph. 2:20-22; 1 Pet. 2:5). The outward trappings of Old Covenant worship have changed in the days of the New Covenant. The basic moral obligation of "*holy convocation*" has not.

The early church of Jesus Christ regularly gathered together as "God's temple" for corporate worship, daily at first (Acts 2:46) and eventually weekly on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7, 1 Cor. 16:2), "*the Lord's day*." the early church did not break with the long standing requirement, revealed previously in God's word, for believers to participate in worship assemblies - even when they saw their *New Covenant* practice (outwardly changed) against the background of the *Old Covenant* pattern.

The priestly ritual of the temple has passed away, to be sure; yet, God's New Covenant people looked at their practice of worship in the light of it. For instance, "*through Him (Christ) then let us offer up a sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of lips which make confession to His name*" (Heb. 13:15), or again "*you are a spiritual house for a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God by Jesus Christ*" (1 Peter 2:5).

From various indications in the New Testament we learn what constitutes the congregational worship of the New Covenant people of God. It includes at least the following items:

1. Praise to God (Heb. 13:15; 1 Peter 2:9 [Is. 43:21]),
2. Corporate Prayer (1 Tim. 2:8; Cf. Phil. 4:6) With Congregational Amens (1 Cor. 14:16),
3. Hymns (Col. 3:16; Eph. 5:19),
4. Scripture Reading (Col. 4:16; 1 Thess. 5:27; 1 Tim. 4:13),
5. Preaching (1 Tim. 4:6-16; 2 Tim. 4:2; Acts 20:7-9).
6. The Lord's Supper (Acts 2:42; 20:7; Cf. 1 Cor. 11:20).

We should remember that God's word is normative for us; it is a law, even when not prefaced with a formula such as "*Thou shalt do...*" What we find in the New Testament practice of worship, accordingly, is the standard of worship to which we must adhere.

Worship is defined, not by personal whims and religious imagination, but solely by the revealed word of God (cf. Col. 2:23). Thus the second commandment forbids us to devise, use, or approve of any religious worship which is not instituted by God Himself - as well as prohibiting us from neglecting, or taking away from, that worship which God has ordained (Ex. 20:4-6; cf. Lev. 10:1; Deut. 4:2; 32:46; Matt. 15:9; 28:20).

Therefore, our obligation to gather with God's people for worship must be understood and measured by the elements of New Testament worship set forth above. If we are doing what God requires of His people, we engage in worship assemblies which are characterized by praise, corporate prayer, hymns, Bible reading, authoritative preaching, and the sacraments.

## **Worship Assemblies are Not Just Any Gathering of Believers**

In the New Testament, those assemblies which constituted the corporate worship of God were understood as something clearly distinct from informal household fellowship and eating, even though the worship assembly may have been in an actual home. Paul distinguishes between "the Lord's Supper" at the assembly and the ordinary meals in one's house (1 Cor. 11:20, 22).

Being in "the church" at worship is, thus, something more than any normal gathering with other believers - even if at the gathering we engage in eating, singing, and prayer. This is evident from the way Paul speaks, for instance, in 1 Cor. 14:35. He differentiates the situation of a woman asking question at "church" from her asking them "at home."

Moreover, despite the fact that "the church" is the body of believers (i.e. the people), Paul uses the following language: "it is shameful for a woman to speak in the church." The expression "in the church" cannot mean within any gathering of believers, or else women would be prohibited from ever speaking when other Christians are present! "In the church" obviously denotes the assembly of believers for the special purpose of ordained worship.

Worship assemblies for Christians are to be characterized by good order, not confusion (1 Cor. 14:26, 33, 40). Thus New Testament congregational worship is led and governed by the overseers (elders who "take care of the Church of God," 1 Tim. 3:-45). That this is the rule for New Testament worship is illustrated by the fact that Paul wrote to deliver instructions for the life of the church, including its corporate worship services, *to pastors* like Timothy (e.g. 1 Tim. 2:1,8,11; 4:13; 2 Tim. 4:2).

These pastoral letters had as one of their purposes that men "may know how they ought to conduct themselves in the house of God, which is the church of the living God" (1 Tim. 3:15). In short, the assembling of God's flock is under the oversight of the shepherds (1 Peter 5:-12) who "preside" over it in all matters, including worship (1 Thess. 5:12-13; Acts 20:28).

## **Assembling For, and Participating in, Worship is Explicitly Required**

The new Testament normative pattern, then, is for God's people to gather together on the Lord's day as "the church" for the specific purpose of worship as defined by God's word (praise, corporate prayer, hymns, Scripture reading, authoritative preaching, and the Lord's Supper) under the oversight of the elders.

It is nothing less than the moral obligation of believers to attend these worship assemblies and not have other interests or activities take priority over them - precisely because assembling for worship is a matter of obedience to God's word, rather than personal discretion.

The New Testament, no less than the Old, requires us to assemble for the purpose of worship. This was the apostolic pattern, as we see in these words: "If therefore the whole church be assembled together..., so he will fall down and worship God, declaring that God is among you indeed" (1 Cor. 14:23-25).

The New Testament explicitly commands that we not voluntarily absent ourselves from the church's recognized gathering for ordained worship. *"Let us consider one another to provoke unto love and good works, not forsaking our own assembling together, as the custom of some is, but exhorting one another"* (Heb. 10:24-25).

When we miss attending the church's worship service or do not participate in its activities, we are not living up to the Scriptural command for us to stand together in worship: "that with one accord you may with one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 15:6; cf. Eph. 5:19-21). It is expected that believers will regularly partake of the Lord's Supper (Jn. 6:53; 1 Cor. 10:17; 11:24-26), and when it is served, the New Testament exhorts believers to (examine themselves and thereby) actually participate in the eating and drinking (1 Cor. 11:27,28).

We conclude by seeing, therefore, that congregational worship is not a matter of entertainment and personal discretion (e.g. "shall we go to church or brunch this morning?"). Nor is it an informal get-together with other Christian friends where religious activities take place (e.g., "we met at their house, sang together and prayed"). God's holy and authoritative word says more.

Scripture makes it our moral obligation not to forsake the assembling of God's flock "as the church" for the specific purpose of corporate worship, as defined by the Lord, under the leading of the shepherds. If we profess to obey Him in all things, let us not be lax or self-willed especially at this important point! It is the highest privilege of the Christian to stand with fellow believers as God's redeemed people, in His presence, to render to Him the praise, adoration and worship which are due to His name. It is preparation for eternity.



[1] The Old Testament festivals of firstfruits and pentecost (looking forward to Christ's resurrection and the giving of the Holy Spirit) were celebrated on the first day of the week (Lev.23:11, 16, 35, 39). Likewise, the new creation began on the first day of the week, having been brought about by Christ's resurrection from the dead (1 Cor. 15:20-28; 2 Cor. 5:17; Col. 1:13-19).

2. That is, a time of instruction based upon God's revealed word. This entails a number of things, including:

(1) "exhortation" (PARAKLISIS; Rom. 12:8; 1 Tim. 4:13; 1 Thess. 2:3; cf. Acts 13:15; 1 Cor. 14:3; Heb. 13:22), which involves beseeching men in earnest (e.g., Rom. 12:1; 2 Cor. 5:20);

(2) "teaching" (*didasko*; Acts 18:11; 1 Tim. 4:13; 6:2; 2 Tim. 2:2; cf. 1 Cor. 14:9), which includes authoritatively laying down the truth (1 Tim. 4:6) and delivering commands (1 Tim. 4:11); and

(3) "proclamation" (*karusso*) - a word which was used to cover a wide variety of discourses; the preaching of the prophets to God's people (Joel 2:1 LXX), synagogue lessons among the Jews (Acts 15:21; Rom. 2:21; cf. Lk. 4:19, 21; Mk. 1:39; Acts 9:20), evangelistic heralding to unbelievers (Matt. 4:17; 20:7, 27; Lk. 24:47; Acts 8:5; 1 Cor. 1:23), and the declarations of the full theological system to *believers* (Acts 20:20, 25, 27), proclamations *within* the Christian assembly (2 Cor. 11:4), words entailing comfort and exhortation among *converts* (1 Thess. 2:9-14) or against heresy in the congregation (1 Cor. 15:11ff.), and pastoral addresses to professing believers who are tempted to turn away from sound doctrine (2 Tim. 4:2-4).

The recent, novel opinion that authoritative preaching of a sermon (exhortation or lesson monologue) is inappropriate within a Christian assembly of believers has no linguistic or theological basis in Scripture, as we see above. Note the example of Paul in Acts 20:7-9. We read that he "discoursed"; according to Kettle, the Greek word refers here to "the delivering of religious lectures." Further, we read that Paul continued his "speech" past midnight; the Greek word (LOGOS) does not (especially unqualified, in the singular, and with definite article) mean dialogue or joint discussion, but an individual's oral presentation, message, or statement (cf. Mk. 2:2; Matt. 15:12; Lk. 1:39; Jn. 4:41; Acts 10:44; 15:32).