

WEEK 2
09.13.15

THE ASSEMBLY OF THE CONGREGATION



FOCUS 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.

LESSON TEXT

Psalm 27:4

4 One thing have I desired of the LORD, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in his temple.

Psalm 84

1 How amiable are thy tabernacles, O LORD of hosts!

2 My soul longeth, yea, even fainteth for the courts of the LORD: my heart and my flesh crieth out for the living God.

3 Yea, the sparrow hath found an house, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, even thine altars, O LORD of hosts, my King, and my God.

4 Blessed are they that dwell in thy house: they will be still praising thee. Selah.

5 Blessed is the man whose strength is in thee; in whose heart are the ways of them.

6 Who passing through the valley of Baca make it a well; the rain also filleth the pools.

7 They go from strength to strength, every one of them in Zion appeareth before God.

8 O LORD God of hosts, hear my prayer: give ear, O God of Jacob. Selah.

9 Behold, O God our shield, and look upon the face of thine anointed.

10 For a day in thy courts is better than a thousand. I had rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God, than to dwell in the tents of wickedness.

11 For the LORD God is a sun and shield: the LORD will give grace and glory: no good thing will he withhold from them that walk uprightly.

12 O LORD of hosts, blessed is the man that trusteth in thee.

Psalm 122:1

1 I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the LORD.



FOCUS THOUGHT

Church attendance is both a command and a privilege resulting in the fulfillment of God's purpose for our lives.



CULTURE CONNECTION

The Outward-Focused Church

Research conducted by the Evangelical Covenant Church indicated that in 2004, an average of only 17.7 percent of Americans attended a Christian church on any given weekend (Kelly Shattuck, “7 Startling Facts: An Up Close Look at Church Attendance in America,” *churchleaders.com*).

After studying thousands of churches, growth expert Thom Rainer concluded that “the most common factor in declining churches is an inward focus.” He writes, “The ministries are only for the members. The budgetary funds are used almost exclusively to meet the needs of the members. The times of worship and worship styles are geared primarily for the members. Conflict takes place when members don’t get things their way.”

On the other hand, Rainer discovered that in the midst of this decline, many individual churches are enjoying significant growth. The common pattern in

growing churches is that they are outwardly focused on the world (Thom Rainer, “The Most Common Factor in Declining Churches,” *thomrainer.com/2014/05/31/common-factor-declining-churches*). Once many congregations have enough money to sustain their budget, maintain their building, and support their pastor, they risk losing the evangelistic focus they once had, adopting a club mentality instead.

Surprisingly, some of the fastest-growing churches today are small congregations! In his book *Unleashing the Potential of the Smaller Church*, Shawn McMullen notes that smaller churches cultivate an intimacy not easily found in larger churches. He observes, “In an age when human interaction is being supplanted by modern technology, many younger families are looking for a church that offers community, closeness and intergenerational relationships.”

OUTLINE

I. THE CALL TO ASSEMBLE

- A. The Church in the Wilderness
- B. The New Testament Church

II. THE PERSONAL BENEFITS OF CHURCH ATTENDANCE

- A. Spiritual Growth
- B. Christian Nurturing

III. THE CHURCH, OUR SPIRITUAL HOME

- A. Everyone Needs a Home
- B. Everyone Needs a Pastor
- C. Everyone Needs a Church Family
- D. Everyone Needs a Place to Serve
- E. The Church Is a Place of Salvation

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

People who have common interests often organize into groups—clubs, guilds, associations, societies, organizations, and so forth. These groups of people find value in

unifying under their common interest, belief, profession, avocation, or some other collective objective. Most of these groups have regular meetings to organize, educate, inspire, and promote their causes. Meeting together in a face-to-face setting builds camaraderie and adds synergy to their cause. We need the human ambience generated by meeting together.

Just as other groups meet regularly, Apostolic believers meet frequently as well. The writer of the Book of Hebrews warned the church of neglecting to have regular meetings. “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” (Hebrews 10:25). It appears from this warning the church had believers who did not see the need for frequently attending church services. The writer urged believers to put even more value on meeting together “as ye see the day approaching.” This

appears to be referring to the soon coming of the Lord.

In I Corinthians 12:12–27, Paul compared the church to the biological collection of organs that make up the human body. (See also Romans 12:4–5.) This metaphor illustrates how strongly connected the body of believers should be. The human body is an amazing unit of collective dependency. One brain controls the entire body. One heart feeds the entire body with blood. If a body part is disconnected from the body, it begins to die immediately. In an age of technological communication marvels, the need to have human contact is still a spiritual need for Christian believers.

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. THE CALL TO ASSEMBLE

Going to church is a privilege. The psalmist said, “I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the LORD” (Psalm 122:1). Assembling together is not only a privilege but also a divine call. God calls us to salvation (Matthew 11:28). He calls us to discipleship (Luke 9:23). He calls us to worship (John 4:23). He calls us to church (Hebrews 10:25).

A. The Church in the Wilderness

Assembling during Old Testament times was different from going to church today. Rather than going inside and sitting in pews, the people gathered outside before the gate. Only the priests were allowed to go inside the Tabernacle and the Temple. They brought their sacrifices to the door and the priest took over from there. The people’s access to spiritual things was limited. Even the priests had limited access to the Holy of Holies. Only the high priests were allowed into this sanctum sanctorum, and then only on the annual Day of Atonement.

The Holy of Holies was the most sacred place on the face of the earth. The Ark of the Covenant, its contents, and the Mercy Seat were the most sacred objects on earth. The Tabernacle was moved scores of times during Israel’s wilderness wanderings. Nevertheless, wherever the Tabernacle was, it was the central place of worship. God made the following promise: “And there I will meet with

the children of Israel, and the tabernacle shall be sanctified by my glory” (Exodus 29:43).

It was here the Hebrews worshiped, offered sacrifices, learned God’s laws, participated in feasts and offerings, found forgiveness, and learned of God’s acceptance or rejection of their offerings. It was an active place where the priests killed animal sacrifices, washed at the laver, sprinkled blood, stoked fires, lit candles, burned incense, ate the shewbread, and offered prayers. The Israelites organized their family tents around the Tabernacle—three tribes on each of the four sides. The Tabernacle was the central object of their camp. It is safe to conclude from a summation of Old Testament review that the children of Israel met frequently at the door of the Tabernacle.

A form of the words *assembly* or *assemble* is used in 112 verses in the King James Version. Obviously anything done in a collective fashion required people to come together. Due to the lack of printing presses and electronic media, information was communicated by word of mouth. Events could not be recorded and listened to in privacy later. These circumstances made the assembly at the door of the Tabernacle, and later the Temple, an important occasion for the Hebrew people.

The Sabbath Day was a special day of worship for the Hebrews: “Six days shall work be done: but the seventh day is the sabbath of rest, an holy convocation; ye shall do no work therein: it is the sabbath of the LORD in all your dwellings” (Leviticus 23:3). The word *convocation* is translated from the Hebrew word *miquq*, which means “calling together” or “sacred assembly.” It can also mean “reading.” Since the Hebrew people did not own personal copies of the Scriptures, these weekly meetings probably included readings from them.

B. The New Testament Church

Jesus and His disciples went to the synagogue, or Temple, on the Sabbath to worship (Mark 1:21; 6:2; Luke 4:16; 6:6; 13:10; Acts 13:14; 17:1–2; 18:4). At some point the conclusion became obvious—Christian believers were not welcome at Jewish services. They continued to meet in houses and other places on the Sabbath (Acts 13:42–44; 16:13). It also appears that after Jesus’

resurrection, the day of worship moved from the Sabbath to the first day of the week—perhaps to celebrate the resurrection (Acts 20:7; I Corinthians 16:2). Sunday did not become a Christian Sabbath, but over time it became a traditional day of worship.

Even though one of the Ten Commandments says, “Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy” (Exodus 20:8), New Testament believers did not commemorate the Sabbath in the same way the Hebrews did under the Law. The principle of rest continued to be a valid principle, but the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the birth of the church transcended the many rules of the Sabbath. Although it is good to take one day a week to rest from one’s labor, just as God did, the writer of Hebrews presented a new concept of rest, which is connected to, but not the same as, the Old Testament rest. (See Hebrews 4.) Believers enter into a rest in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ—not just on the Sabbath Day, but perpetually (Matthew 11:28–29).

The New Testament word *church* is translated from the Greek word *ekklesia*, which means “assembly” or “gathering” (*Harper’s Bible Dictionary*). The New Testament writers used a number of metaphors to describe the church: a building (Ephesians 2:20), a city (Matthew 5:14), a sheepfold (John 10), a garden (I Corinthians 3:8–9), a bride (Ephesians 5:22–23), a branch of a vine (John 15:1–11), and a body (I Corinthians 12). These metaphors indicate directly or indirectly the usefulness of unity, collectivism, coalescing, or coming together.

II. THE PERSONAL BENEFITS OF CHURCH ATTENDANCE

Some individuals who profess to embrace the Christian faith do not go to church. The excuses are many. Some say, “All the church talks about is money.” Others complain about the music, the preaching, a lack of friendliness, and so on. Some cannot find a church that believes exactly as they do, so they do not go to church anywhere. Over time people can get their feelings hurt and, due to a lack of maturity, boycott the church. A few people are just anti-social and do not like crowds. Nevertheless, Apostolic Christians will go to church unless circumstances physically

prevent them from getting there. Church is a source of essential spiritual nurturing, and it is a place for personal ministry fulfillment.

A. Spiritual Growth

Paul declared that the five main ministries in the church mentioned in Ephesians 4:11 are “for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ: that we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine” (Ephesians 4:12–14).

Just as a child grows and develops over time, so should believers. Paul told the church at Corinth, “I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able” (I Corinthians 3:2). The writer of Hebrews explained, “For every one that useth milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil” (Hebrews 5:13–14). These verses reveal the Christian life to be a process of growth. Even Jesus learned obedience through the things He suffered (Hebrews 5:8).

Christians find spiritual food and nourishment at church. Through listening to preaching and teaching, believers grow in knowledge. The Scripture says, “So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Romans 10:17). The Bible is our source of faith. Belief alone is not faith. People believe all kinds of false things, but believing on the basis of God’s Word is true faith. Paul told the church at Thessalonica, “For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe” (I Thessalonians 2:13).

B. Christian Nurturing

The church is a rich place of spiritual nurturing. Prayer is essential to spiritual growth, and the church is a place of community and

private prayer. James said, “The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much” (James 5:16). Jesus said, “It is written, My house is the house of prayer” (Luke 19:46). God promised Judah, “Then shall ye call upon me, and ye shall go and pray unto me, and I will hearken unto you. And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart” (Jeremiah 29:12–13). At church people find a place to pray, get motivated to pray, and find teaching about how to pray. Collective prayer is a powerful tool for unifying the church. (See Acts 2.)

Apostolic Christians need fellowship with others of like faith. We are a light in a dark world, but time spent “charging our batteries” is essential. Throughout the Bible people of faith dined together (Exodus 12:1–7; 24:9–11). The return of the prodigal son was cause for celebrating with a great family banquet. The New Testament church saw the need for fellowship and broke bread from house to house (Acts 2:46). Jesus ate with His disciples frequently. The most notable occasion was the Last Supper. This meal with His disciples established a Christian sacrament we call the “Lord’s Supper.” The early church probably celebrated the Lord’s Supper in a different manner than we do. It was more like having a meal together. In I Corinthians 11 Paul gave instructions about how to have a common meal together correctly. What had been intended to bring the church together was causing disunity. Some overindulged while others went hungry due to financial disparity. The purpose of the Lord’s Supper was not only to reflect upon the death of Jesus but to draw believers together.

The church is to be a place of refuge from the crucibles of life. Church members lose family members in death—sometimes tragically. People lose their jobs, suffer handicaps, lose property and investments, suffer divorces, deal with wayward children, and have crises in their relationships. Being a church member can be enormously helpful during a crisis. Fellow church members can become closer than one’s own family.

Almsgiving is a major area of Christian giving (Matthew 6:1–4; Acts 10:2; 24:17). Our government, through tax collections, has many entitlement programs to help the

poor, but sometimes people fall between the cracks. It is also sometimes a comfort to hear a kind word and to have a listening ear.

The church is a house of worship. Most churches have music and worship leaders to create a worshipful atmosphere. Believers coming together and singing, lifting their hands, clapping their hands, and rejoicing in unity is an edifying experience. Many nonbelievers are drawn to God by the worship in an Apostolic service. They are swept away by the sincerity and exuberance. Heartfelt worship invites the presence of the Holy Spirit. This creates a glorious ambience where miraculous things can occur. Why would a believer not want to be a part of such an edifying event?

The church should become a launching pad for evangelism. Not only does a church service generate evangelistic opportunities, but the members are edified and instructed about soulwinning. Believers leave the church inspired to let their light shine. They want to share the joy they have experienced. A church that meets regularly will be a light-house in a community. The presence of the church is a preserving influence. Jesus said we are “the salt of the earth” (Matthew 5:13).

III. THE CHURCH, OUR SPIRITUAL HOME

Just as the people of Israel camped around the Tabernacle in the wilderness, believers should make the church the center of their lives today. We should develop a love for the house of God and the people of God. It is our spiritual home. It should be like a family—not so tight that outsiders don’t feel welcome, but always having open arms to visitors and new members. Some churches have day-care centers, schools, self-help classes, and ESL groups meeting in their buildings. Some churches even open their building to the community for civic functions. The church should be a beehive of ministry.

A. Everyone Needs a Home

Home is where we find unconditional love. Home is where things are shared. Home is where we can relax and find security. Our world today is becoming increasingly secular. Some church members work in caustic environments. They have to deal with profanity,

vulgar conversations, hostile people, blasphemers, dishonesty, and demanding bosses.

The church should be a place of escape from all this turmoil. We can relate to the words of the psalmist: “My soul longeth, yea, even fainteth for the courts of the LORD: my heart and my flesh crieth out for the living God. . . . For a day in thy courts is better than a thousand. I had rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God, than to dwell in the tents of wickedness” (Psalm 84:2, 10).

When people come to church, they should feel as if they are finally at home. It should be a place of camaraderie, encouragement, faith-building, and spiritual refreshment. The church should offer challenges as well, but in today’s world people need encouragement to live the Christian life.

B. Everyone Needs a Pastor

Spiritual authority is a biblical principle. Paul said, “Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God” (Romans 13:1). In Romans 13:2–6 Paul taught about authority. We are subject to God’s authority and His delegated authority. We encounter authority everywhere: police on the street, the boss at work, the teacher at school, and the pastor at church. Paul made a strong statement: “Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God” (Romans 13:2).

The writer of Hebrews warned: “Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you” (Hebrews 13:17). Paul instructed Timothy to “preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine” (II Timothy 4:2). Pastors are to “reprove” and “rebuke.” These are strong words. (See I Timothy 5:20; II Timothy 3:16; Titus 1:13; 2:15.)

On the other hand, pastors are entrusted to care for their flocks, not as lords over God’s heritage, but as examples. (See I Peter 5:3.) A pastor’s principal concern is not authority but how to nurture and care for God’s flock. Authority is one tool to help with this task.

C. Everyone Needs a Church Family

The church is called a family in the New Testament. Paul said, “For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named” (Ephesians 3:14–15). I John 2 addresses the church and mentions affectionately fathers, young men, and little children. We are referred to as “babes” in Christ (Romans 2:20; I Corinthians 3:1; Hebrews 5:13; I Peter 2:2). We all have one heavenly Father. We have all been washed in the blood of Jesus. We all bear His name—Jesus. We have all been filled with the same Holy Spirit. We are one body of Christ. These unifying ties make us a spiritual family. In some ways we are more connected to church members than to our own physical families.

Some people are blessed to have good families that get along and love one another. Families can be a great comfort and support, but not everyone has such a blessing. Having a spiritual family to lean on in times of crisis, tragedy, loss of health, death of loved ones, and so forth can be a great blessing. That is why we call our fellow church members brothers and sisters. The church is a family.

D. Everyone Needs a Place to Serve

Every member of the church should be serving in some capacity. There are diversities of giftings and talents in the church (I Corinthians 12:28; Romans 12:1–8; Ephesians 4:11). It is the responsibility of every Christian to search for an area of ministry and fulfill it. The church provides a place where that can happen. The following areas of contribution are important aspects of our need for the church.

Emotional support. Paul said, “Bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2). Being a member of the body of Christ is more than learning new choruses about how great it is to be saved. We are responsible for one another’s well-being. John said, “A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another” (John 13:34).

Financial support. The church must have money to function. Church buildings and property have to be secured, utility bills

have to be paid, the church plant has to be maintained, and the church staff has to be remunerated. A healthy church also gives to various missions projects in North America and around the world. Church members support the church with their tithes and offerings.

Almsgiving has been taken over by the government for the most part, but the church continues to receive requests from people in distress. All of these needs put a financial strain on the church. Paul said concerning giving: “Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver” (II Corinthians 9:7). Paul instructed the church at Corinth to receive an offering with these words: “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” (I Corinthians 16:2).

Prayer support. James said, “Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much” (James 5:16). Prayer is power. Just telling other believers we are praying for them can be a great encouragement. However, we should do more than just say such things. We need to pray for one another, for God hears our prayers and answers them.

Jesus said, “And all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive” (Matthew 21:22). We can claim His promise.

Physical support. The Christian church initially practiced a form of collectivism to meet the physical needs of the believers (Acts 2:44–47). Although this arrangement did not continue for any length of time, we still are urged to help one another. (See I John 3:17–18.) James indicated that words are not enough; God requires action. (See James 2:15–16.)

E. The Church Is a Place of Salvation

Jesus told Peter, “And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18). The “rock” was not Peter, but rather his understanding of who Jesus was. Peter was the messenger. Peter was the first to preach the gospel on the Day of Pentecost, the birthday of the church.

Most of us first came to God by attending church. A large percentage of people receive the Holy Spirit at church. The church is God’s kingdom on the earth. We cannot be saved without the church; neither can we ever fulfill God’s mission without the church.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

Paul said, “Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it” (Ephesians 5:25). God loves the church. We need to love the church as well. Sometimes our love will be tested due to the lack of perfection within the church. When we are defrauded or hurt in some fashion, it is always a mistake to walk away from the church. The church is the best we have in this fallen world.

The church gives us protection against the enemy of our souls. It is where we get spiritual food for our strength and wholeness. It is the place where we can exercise our spiritual gifts and use our God-given talents. When we find people in the world who are hungry for God, we can bring them to church where they can feel the presence of the Holy Spirit and hear convicting preaching. Church is the place where we get inspiration to live the Christian life. We find camaraderie with other believers and organize our forces for advancing the kingdom of God. ■

REFLECTIONS

- What are the benefits of church members meeting face to face?
- How did attending church in the Old Testament differ from New Testament church attendance?
- How does the meaning of the word *church* encourage church attendance?
- Why do believers need a pastor?
- Why do we give financially to our church?