

The Importance of Attending the Worship Service

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THESE are three Greek words in the New Testament associated with the idea of a Christian Church: sunagoge, meaning 'an assembly'; episunagoge, meaning 'a gathering together'; and ekklesia, meaning 'a called out assembly'. The thought of meeting one with another is therefore basic to the biblical doctrine of the Church, and believers should think most seriously about the way in which they come to the solemn worship of God. It may be that some stand in need of a gentle rebuke with respect to one particular - the matter of being punctual at worship. There are good reasons why some are unable to be present at the appointed time, but my concern is with the regular habit of being late. If this is a manifestation of carelessness and thoughtlessness, I would urge Christians to allow their practice to be corrected by the Word of God.

Seven Points to be Noted

1. If Christians had suitable thoughts of the God whom they seek to serve, they would take greater care, as the entertaining of any worthy view of God should strike us with reverence and be the means of engaging us to the right performance of spiritual duties (Ps 89:6,7). Our God has the right to demand that we have respect to the divine honour in every religious exercise and, so that the whole congregation of worshippers might reflect the holiness and majesty of His Person in the institutions of His worship, He declares: 'Before all the people I will be glorified' (Lev 10:3). Yet it is possible that our conduct and our approach to God on His Day may reveal an almost sinful contempt of the divine Majesty and this inevitably leads to great dishonour cast upon His name (Mal 1:6-8). 'He will have His service well done, as well as done', wrote Thomas

Boston, and all Scripture confirms the truth of this statement. Do not think that He is unable to see your empty place (1 Kgs 9:3), for such poor thoughts of God should never come into our minds: rather let it be remembered, that as soon as the Church is gathered, the Lord is there (Matt 18:20). He should not be waiting for our praise, but our praise should be waiting for Him (Ps 65:1). Besides, if God is as He is described in His Word, any coming before Him warrants due preparation: 'Prepare to meet thy God, O Israel' (Amos 4:12), which thing may never be done, at least not done well if there is a rushing into the Church some time after the service has commenced.

2. According to the Scriptures, when the Church comes to worship, not only are there people present, but others belonging to a most glorious society. The Church raises its song of praise with myriads of surrounding angels (Heb 12:12). Unspeakably grand, then, is worship wherever it takes place. Here is 'the house of God', but here also is 'the gate of heaven' (Gen 28:17). If celestial beings all unseen draw near, uniting their praise with ours and swelling the chorus unto God, it surely becomes us to be there when the first note of praise is sung: remembering that we meet not in the presence of God only, but also with multitudes of these holy angels. Their presence in our meetings should make us exceedingly careful. The exercises of worship should be the more decently performed, as the Apostle so rightly reminds us, 'because of the angels' (1 Cor 11:10). Indeed, those holy angels who attend do, by their very presence, rebuke us: they leave nothing undone in the magnifying of their God, but worship

Him without intermission, even though they have never known redeeming grace.

3. The keeping of the Sabbath by Israel was a 'sign' or visible token that God was their God, as it distinguished them from the unsanctified people of the world (Exod 31:17), and our strict observance of the Lord's Day is also such a witness to the unbelieving masses. Should an outsider join us at the appointed time, what would he find? A half-empty Church, a poor rendering of the opening psalm in consequence, and various interruptions whilst late-comers take their places! Such a one would hardly be moved to wonder at the grace of God to His people. Not surprisingly he might leave a little later somewhat disillusioned. God's minister should be able to say to the people: 'Come with me (not "after" me!) to the sacrifice' (1 Sam 16:5), whilst each member of the congregation should, after the service, be able to say: 'I had gone with the multitude, I went with them to the house of God, with the voice of joy and praise, with a multitude that kept holyday' (Ps 42:4). It must have been a delightful sight to see Israelites approaching the sanctuary together, and it was, and still is, a powerful sign to all observing it.

4. Slackness over this duty will mean also that the people concerned will miss out on the blessings of the Day, for they, and only they, who seek God earnestly and diligently are likely to find Him in the fullness of His grace (Prov 8:17). Many have proved that spiritual diligence alone will lead to spiritual experience and, because of this 'everyone that is godly' turns to God with prayer and praise 'in a time of finding' (Ps 32:6, mg). They watch 'the times' as they know it is best to be composed in spirit, to be rid of all worldly and unworthy thoughts and to be concentrating with all desires and affections upon the great Object of faith. Theirs it is to come early to the assembly, ensuring that the soul is at peace before God; they stand with all who stand to praise, lest God be grieved and turn aside; and, after the hymn or psalm has been sung, they bow before God

in prayer with the whole congregation, because they know that the rest of the service is sanctified by such prayer to their own spiritual profit. Surely the God of Heaven will bless them and honour all those who honour Him! He will surely be found by those who seek Him thus.

5. Of the present state of things in our Churches, it may be said: 'It was not always as it is now'. In early days when Christ was here 'all the people came early in the morning to Him in the temple, for to hear Him' (Lk 21:38); and should not that always be the case? The New Testament Church met together as a whole and 'continued with one accord in prayer and supplication' (Acts 1:14 cf.2:1). The disciples, Peter and John, 'went up together into the temple at the hour of prayer' (Acts 3:1). One early Gentile congregation could honestly say to the preacher: 'Now therefore are we all here present before God, to hear all things that are commanded thee of God' (Acts 10:33). The faithful have always thought that important. J. J. Goadby, in a most interesting little work on early Baptist history, proved from various records that the believers in the seventeenth century were particularly concerned about this matter and he wrote: 'The muster-roll of the members was called on certain days, with almost military strictness, as if they were an army campaigning. And so, in a spiritual sense, they deemed themselves'. It is an indication that the Churches of the Lord Jesus Christ have, since the beginning, considered this matter to be important.

6. The word used in the Bible for the keeping of the Sabbath (e.g. Lev 19:30) really means 'to keep with great care', as if it was like some great treasure of which a man was determined to lose nothing. The Lord God has given us one day in seven as a special means of Grace, and Scripture, history and experience give their combined testimony to the fact, that on this day, of all days, God delights singularly to bless. Every moment in His presence on the Lord's day is a little of eternity in time, and

the man who truly believes that, will not lose any of it if he can possibly help it. Even the smallest part of it is of inestimable price and the child of God will be determined to improve all the time available to him in the fellowship of the Church. On the day of God it is well to do all that God has prescribed and all that the day demands. This Israel anciently did and it is recorded to the praise of their faithfulness, that they worshipped 'according to the custom, as the duty of every day required' (Ezra 3:4). Should any object that this is 'legalism' and 'the observance of days', I would respectfully remind them that 'the Son of Man is Lord also of the sabbath' (Mk 2:28) and it is evidently His desire also to guard it against all abuses and to see that all is done in a way pleasing to Him.

7. Every place where worship is offered to God is sacred to Him whose name is holy. God's people were told in Old Testament times, not only to keep the sabbath, but also to 'reverence my sanctuary' (Lev 19:30; 26:2). This meant keeping out all uncleanness and performing everything in a seemly and becoming way. There is still a standard of conduct to be maintained in the society of the faithful and instruction has been given 'that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the Church of the living God' (1 Tim 3:15).

Certain Important Principles are linked with the Lord's Day

(1) It is possible to rob God of that which properly belongs to Him. One day in seven does not belong to us at all, except in a secondary sense. That day God delights to possess for Himself. 'The seventh day', so the ancient oracle reads, 'is the sabbath of the Lord thy God' (Deut 5:14). Let the word 'day' in this context be given due emphasis. The believer does not fulfil his responsibility by being in the house of God for an hour in the morning and then again for an hour in the evening. God's requirement runs: 'From even unto even shall ye celebrate your sabbath' (Lev

23:32). The Lord justifiably makes complaint when He hears foolish people murmuring about time, and He sternly calls to us: 'Turn away thy foot from the sabbath, from doing thy pleasure on my holy day' (Isa 58:12). It is possible for the Lord's Day to be profaned by unspiritual attitudes to divine service. Moreover, to seek to encroach upon consecrated time is to entangle the soul in guilt, for 'it is a snare to the man who devoureth that which is holy' (Prov 20:25). We would not dare curtail divine service for the sake of pleasing men. We earnestly contend for the freedom of God on His Day.

(2) That has ever been the way of the godly. Anciently the people of God waited until the service was concluded. So it was in the days of the monarchy: 'As soon as David had made an end...He blessed the people in the name of the Lord of Hosts...so all the people departed every one to his own house' (2 Sam 6:18, 19). There was at that time a fear of God in men and those were the days of holy solemnities and God-glorifying conventions in Israel. God does not approve of anyone, whoever he may be, going out before worship is ended unless there is good reason (see Ezek 46:10). Consider how Mary and Joseph went up to Jerusalem for the annual feast (religious duties lasting seven days!), taking with them, the child Jesus, aged only twelve, that as a family they might honour God. The Gospel states that 'when they had fulfilled the days...they returned' (Lk 2:43). They thus gave God all the time that was His and then departed knowing the smile of His approval.

(3) When the spiritual exercises of the first day of the week become irksome and burdensome so that someone longs to be released from the service, it speaks not well for their spiritual state. The symptom is the same as was noticed in the people of Israel, when they cried out: 'Behold, what a weariness is it!' (Mal 1:13 cf. Amos 8:5). In their case it meant slothfulness and stubbornness of spirit and it can mean no less today. The believer who is showing every evidence of life in the Spirit

is quick to embrace all the occasions for attending the ordinances of God. He is 'swift to hear'; he is numbered with 'all the people...very attentive to hear Him'; he is always at prayer before God, saying 'O send out thy light and truth; let them lead me' (James 1:19; Lk 19:48; Ps 43:3). To such a soul it is the highest delight of all to be in the holy place and well might he want to stay there beholding the beauty of the Lord forever, as Peter evidently desired to do after catching a glimpse of the majesty of Christ. Such was the sight that he cried out of the fullness of his heart and besought the Lord that they might abide there some time: 'Master, it is good for us to be here: and let us make three tabernacles' (Lk 9:33).

(4) That some are not so enthusiastic about worship as others is clear, but why is this? Sadly it must be said that they have no sense of the inestimable worth of time, failing to see that the right use of it could richly benefit their immortal souls. 'Man knoweth not his time' was the sad lament of King Solomon (Eccles 9:12). Soon will come the awful awakening and many, sadly too late, will wish that they could have been more ready for the coming of the Lord. But 'Blessed are those servants whom the Lord when He cometh shall find watching' (Lk 12:37). The man who grumbles over the length of time allowed him for soul-preparation is afflicted with spiritual madness and has lost all concept of time and eternity. 'Where is your preparedness for meeting God and reckoning with Him? Where is your readiness for an eternity in His company, and the society of saints and angels? Yes! I may well ask, Where? You cannot give an answer. You cannot give God one single day in seven! It wearies you to spend one seventh part of your time in attempting to know anything about Him, before whose bar you are going one day to stand! Oh, Sabbath-breaker, consider your ways and be wise!' (J. C. Ryle, Bishop of Liverpool, 1880 - 1900).

(5) It is possible, I readily concede, to come to the Church in a right frame, but during the service to feel

a reluctance to stay long. This is invariably caused by one of two things: instruction or distraction. Let me explain. All that some want from the ministry is a sweet collection of 'blessed thoughts' producing a lovely little 'feeling' of comfort within. Should they hear stirring and demanding preaching about law and obedience, the service suddenly becomes too long! The basic problem is a refusal to submit to the whole counsel of God. 'This is a rebellious people... that will not hear the law of the Lord: which say to the seer, See not; and to the prophets, Prophecy not unto us right things, speak unto us smooth things...' (Is 30:9, 10). As to the second possible cause, it is well to remember that it is all too easy to be hindered in our devotions. Whilst seeking the things above, out of the heart may 'proceed evil thoughts' (Mk 7:21) and Satan may be 'standing...to resist' (Zech 3:1). Yet let none yield before these attacks. Such temptations must be overcome and defeat must never be admitted. The concern of God is that we may 'attend upon the Lord without distraction' (1 Cor 7:35).

(6) The idolatrous Ephesians 'all with one voice about the space of two hours cried out, Great is Diana of the Ephesians' (Acts 19:34). Shall heathens in their ignorance spend long time before their dead idols and shall Christians complain of a good season before the living God? There is scarce anything so tragic in this world as a professing believer who begrudges God time. The spiritual relatives of such people afford no cause for boasting. There was Doeg, the treacherous Edomite, who was 'detained before the Lord' (1 Sam 21:7) and then there was Judas, a wicked professor of faith, who could not wait for the end of the service in the Upper Room and, after receiving the sop, 'went immediately out' (Jn 13:30).

(7) There can be no doubt that in apostolic times Christians knew soul-concern and the Spirit gave liberty to Christ's ministers, with the result that the Church was greatly increased. One wonders how the apostle Paul would have suited some modern

congregations, for in Acts 19 we are told that on one occasion he prolonged his speech until midnight. Doubtless it was a somewhat exceptional occasion, but do we not need to pray God to rid the Church of shallowness, to create a deep sense of spiritual need in all who own His Name, and to grant us again flood times of grace on His Day? We believe and declare

the glorious doctrines of grace and upon these God will still command His blessing as in the past.

O God our God, may it please Thee to impress upon Thy people the truth of Thy Word. May it come to us in the power of the Holy Spirit, manifesting Thy glory, so that Thine eternal and ever-blessed Name might be praised the more among us, through Jesus Christ our Lord! Amen.