

A GRIEVOUS, AGE-OLD SPIRITUAL MALADY

It is obvious that many—some who have been in the church for decades—are merely playing at the job of being Christians. One tell-tale sign is their sloppy attendance habits—or none at all—in the church's worship and study assemblies. Habitual, recurrent non-attendance remains a persistent problem in most congregations, but it is hardly a new phenomenon. Hebrews 10:25 states: "Not forsaking our own assembling together, **as the custom of some is**, but exhorting one another; and so much the more, as ye see the day drawing nigh" (Emph. DM)

There is indeed more to being what God wants us to be than attending every meeting, but no one will ever convince me that the God Who gave His Son and the Christ who suffered Calvary for us can be pleased with less than our absolute best in this regard. Those who do not count these matters to be serious do not know the meaning of *serious* in spiritual terms. Those who do not appreciate plain Bible preaching on this subject will appreciate even less the Lord's evaluation of their ungodly habits at The Judgment. Those who do not want their elders to "bother" them when they backslide will like being bothered on The Last Day even less. They should not become angry at the preacher or the elders, but at their own spiritual slovenliness—and repent.

Able-bodied saints can almost always do what we ought to do, and being present for every meeting of the church for worship and study is one of the things we ought to do. If we do not have time to eat without missing Bible classes or worship, we can eat later without starving to death. If we can go to work, to school, or to shop when we have a headache or it is raining, we can go to worship and Bible classes under these conditions. If it is within our power to do so, we must arrange our schedules to be present when the church meets because we are a part of it and we love the Lord who owns it and us. These matters pertain to seeking first the kingdom (Mat. 6:33).

If the Lord had to depend on members who count worship and Bible class attendance to be optional or even unnecessary, the such congregations would die of spiritual dry-rot in a month's time. It is amazing how much He accomplishes through that faithful percentage of folks who attend, give, and work consistently and faithfully. We can only imagine what He could accomplish if every member were not only faithful to the Lord in attendance, but in every other aspect of their lives as well.

FELLOWSHIP AND FORSAKING THE ASSEMBLY

Is **forsaking** (i.e., not merely being unavoidably absent due to illness, age, accident, etc., but deserting, abandoning) the assemblies of the church a sin? If it is not, then one can rebel against a direct, specific prohibition of the Holy Spirit without guilt. If it is not a sin for one member, then it is not a sin for any. Logically, **every member could forsake the assembly repeatedly without sinning**. If it is a sin, does it necessitate withdrawal of fellowship its perpetrator does not repent? If it does not "rise to the level of withdrawal," why does it not? It is not unusual to hear some reply to this question, "Such brethren have already withdrawn their fellowship from the church, so it would be pointless (some say impossible) to withdraw from them." This misses a major point of the issue, however. It assumes that Christians have fellowship only when the church assembles, but is fellowship thus confined? The Philippians had fellowship with Paul when he was not even in the same city, much less in one of their assemblies (Phi. 4:14–15). Fellowship also involves the element of endorsement and approval, whether in or out of the assembly of a local congregation (Gal. 2:9; Eph. 5:11; 2 John 9–11). When Paul commanded the Corinthian church to cease fellowship with the fornicating brother, this involved not eating a common meal with him, unrelated to a worship assembly (1 Cor. 5:9–11).

Paul's charge to the Thessalonians is relevant to the question of withdrawing from the impenitent absentee: "Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which they received of us" (2 The. 3:6). The Greek word translated "disorderly" "...was especially a military term, denoting not keeping rank, insubordinate" (*Vine's*, p. 174). In the context, the term specifically applied to idleness and negligence, rather than to doctrinal or moral corruption (vv. 7–12). They were thereby "out of step" with the Word of God, insubordinate to the Lord, and subjects of withdrawal.

What could be a more obvious sign of one's "breaking rank" in the Lord's "army" than to place one's personal convenience or preferences before the sacred duty and exalted privilege of assembling faithfully with the saints? What greater evidence of negligence and spiritual idleness could one find than such conduct? Furthermore, what could be a more public display of one's disdain for things spiritual and eternal than such behavior? Local congregations have the Scriptural obligation to withdraw fellowship from such disorderly members, at least thereby demonstrating the congregation's Scriptural disapproval of their behavior, even if it fails to produce repentance.

ELDERS AND THE FORSAKERS

Elders must "take heed...to all the flock" and "watch" for its welfare (Acts 20:28, 31). They are duty-bound to "watch in behalf of" the souls under their oversight (Heb. 13:17). This task involves being observant concerning anyone who may begin going astray, whether morally or doctrinally—or through indifference or neglect. When congregations continue to carry members in their directories who have not been in a worship assembly for many months (sometimes even years), and the elders have done nothing about it, who is at greater fault—the **assembly-forsaker or the negligent elders**? God-fearing bishops will watch in view of both detection and correction. The fact is clear from the New Testament that the responsibility for the spiritual safety, progress, indoctrination in the Truth, and discipline of the church they oversee is upon their shoulders.

That the New Testament teaches the church to discipline its members who will not discipline themselves is beyond controversy (Mat. 18:15–17; Rom. 16:17–18; 1 Cor. 5:1–13; 2 The. 3:6, 14–15; et al.). The New Testament just as clearly teaches that when a church has elders, they are to make decisions concerning the optional and expedient details (e.g., when and how) of this obligatory action. In the qualifications for elders, Paul was very specific about their disciplinary function. They must be men who are "holding to the faithful word," enabling them to "exhort in the sound doctrine, and to convict the gainsayers" (Tit. 1:9). It is their duty to lead in these responsibilities. Obviously a church can Scripturally exist and function without elders. It can also discipline its own members whether or not it has an eldership. However, when a congregation has elders, their responsibility of shepherding, overseeing, tending, and ruling, including leading the church in its discipline, "goes with the territory."

It is grievous to contemplate how few elderships ever lead their congregations in withdrawing from erring, impenitent members. Are all of the members of so many congregations so zealous and righteous that practically none needs to be publicly disciplined? Experience and observation deny such. Rather, elders have all too often been willing to wink at immorality, false doctrine, divisive behavior, and/or spiritual idleness and neglect rather than deal Scripturally with it. This neglect stems from such varied factors as not wanting to offend friends or disrupt their own family relationships, fear of losing contributions, or downright laziness. The result is not only negligent elders who must give account to the Lord, but severely weakened churches at best and the apostasy of entire congregations in countless cases. Elders simply cannot exalt Christ if they are unwilling to lead the church boldly in its obligation to cast out those who will not repent of their habitual sins, whether of doctrinal error, immorality, or negligence.

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