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To Whom Given?

In some internet circles I am infamous, even vilified, as being anti-Sabbatarian. Those who carefully read what I write know that is not exactly true. I am certainly not opposed to the concept of a day of rest. I would never object to or prevent anyone from observing sabbath. What I do oppose is binding the sabbath where it has never been bound. What I do oppose is making the sabbath into something it was never intended to be. What I do oppose is legalism at the expense of the grace of God.

Let it be first said that I believe that the Jewish people are expected to keep sabbath. I do believe that Christians who are Jewish may even possibly be expected to keep sabbath. That said, I must also define what is meant, and not meant, by keeping sabbath.

There are a group of Christians who believe that even though they were never Jewish they are still bound by the Law of Moses. More particularly, they believe they are bound by the Ten Commandments to the Jewish people, and emphasize the command to “remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.” (Ex 20:8) These Christians believe that observing the sabbath precludes assembling as a church on Sunday. To them a principal aspect of the sabbath is the assembly for worship on that day. It is true that the Jewish people were commanded to assemble on that day. (Lev 23:3) That was not, however, the primary purpose of the day, nor was it the only day on which the people gathered. Even to this day devout Jews assemble every day of the week for worship. The Jewish people, unlike their Christian counterparts, never limited assembly on other days. Those who object to first-day assemblies generally do so whether the same congregation also assembles on the seventh day or not. In this they differ from the Jewish practice of the Law of Moses.

The principal reasons given in scripture for observance of the sabbath emphasized rest rather than assembly. Sabbath was a day set aside in which no constructive work was to be performed. (Ex 35:2) Scripture gives two reasons for this prohibition. One is that God rested on the seventh day. (Ex 20:11) The other is that the Israelites were slaves in Egypt, and therefore not allowed a day of rest. Sabbath provided a rest for them, for their animals, and for their servants/slaves that

had not been afforded to them. (Deut 5:14-15) These reasons for sabbath lead to some important observations.

Some argue that sabbath observance dates back to creation, because God rested on that day. Interestingly, sabbath is not mentioned in Genesis at all. It is first mentioned in relation to the gathering of manna in the wilderness. (Ex 16:23) In verse 29 of the same chapter Moses explains that “the Lord hath given *you* the sabbath.” (Emphasis mine) It was given to the Israelites after they had left Egypt. There is never any indication that sabbath was given before Exodus 16, to the Israelites or anyone else.

If sabbath observance was specifically tied to the Egyptian captivity, and it was, then the clear implication is that nobody who had not gone through that captivity, either themselves or in their ancestors, was required to keep sabbath. Most non-Jews were never in Egyptian captivity; therefore, they are not bound by sabbath law.

Many years later, one of the prophets taught that sabbath was given specifically to the Israelites upon leaving Egypt. “Moreover also I gave them my sabbaths, to be a sign between me and them, that they might know that I am the LORD that sanctify them.” (Ezek 20:12) God tells Ezekiel that sabbath was a sign of the covenant made in the wilderness. It was a sign to the Israelites, and to them alone. Those who were not direct descendants of the Israelites who had been in Egypt were never required to keep the sign of sabbath.

There is absolutely nothing wrong with observing a day of rest, or of doing so on the seventh day. Where some make their mistake is binding that on people on whom the scriptures never intended it to be bound.

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WE SHALL ASSEMBLE

Do I have to go to church? Why should I go to church; I can worship God just as well by myself? Listening to the radio or watching a service on TV is just as good as being there. Jesus yes; church no. After all, they are just a bunch of hypocrites.

Sound familiar? These are all actual questions or comments from people. It seems that some people want to be Christians, but just don't want to be with Christians. They want the benefit of salvation, but are not willing to associate with others of like mind. Recent studies have shown that this is a growing concern among all American churches, and it has been a concern in Europe for several years. More and more, people who self-identify as Christians are saying they want a closer "relationship" with God, but feel they can accomplish that without the church. They see no benefit from assembly, and many things wrong with it.

Hypocrites and apathy

Among the biggest complaints about assemblies of the church are the accusations that the church is full of hypocrites and that there is no life in the assemblies. To a certain extent they are accurate.

There are hypocrites in the assemblies and out of them. Perhaps the biggest hypocrites are those who claim

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to follow Christ but refuse to assemble with the church—the ones making the accusation. But there are also hypocrites in the assemblies.

Hypocrisy comes in many forms. The most complained about are those who identify themselves as Christians but most of the time do not live like they should. These are the "Sunday Christians" who attend the assembly, and think that by doing so they have fulfilled their obligations to God. Another type is the "Hyper Christians." These are the holier-than-thou, closed-club Christians. They take pride in their status with God, and see no reason to upset the status quo by speaking to those they consider sinners, which is usually everyone not in their congregation. Less damaging, perhaps, but more unfortunate are the I-want-Christianity-on-my-terms

hypocrites. After all, the definition of a hypocrite is an actor who wears a mask. These people wear the mask of Christianity without ever trying to obey God.

Yes, there are hypocrites inside and outside the assemblies of the church. It is the height of hypocrisy, though, to claim to follow God and ignore one of his institutions designed to help one be a better follower.

Interestingly, those same people who complain about hypocrites in the church are more than happy to associate with hypocrites in other walks of life—jobs, politics, families. The problem is that they don't understand what the church is. They believe the church to be limited to the assembly, or they believe the church should be a bunch of perfect people. There are no perfect people; there are forgiven people. The church is a bunch of people who sin, but try not to. They are forgiven, and at varying stages in the process of working toward fighting sin in their lives. Most importantly, the church does not stop at the door of a building. A living church continues throughout the week in homes, job sites, schools, and anywhere two or more Christians gather, whether or not they engage in "worship" as most people define it.

And that is the other accusation. The church today is apathetic. We hear that mostly from the young people (and the older people said the same thing when they were younger). The singing is unenthusiastic. The prayers are repetitious. The members don't seem to do anything for others. While this may be true of some, or even many, congregations, it is not a valid reason for failing to assemble with them. If the singing is dead, maybe that is because the one complaining is spending more time listening than trying to enliven the singing. If that one sincere person is not leading, but complaining, it is little wonder they have much to complain about. If one has time to complain about apathy in the church, it is because that person is not working. He or she is like the little boy who told his mother, "I counted ten people with their eyes open during the prayer."

Support Group

Parents whose children face various diagnoses are often directed to support groups. Parents of CMV children, Down Syndrome children, and many other conditions are strongly advised to seek out others who share their concerns and face their same fears. We all face the diagnosis of sin, and the church is God's support group for sinners.

It may be true that you can worship God as well alone as in a congregation (but probably not). Nevertheless, the church is more than worship. When the writer of Hebrews admonished people not to neglect

assembling together, he/she did so not primarily because of the singing and the prayers, but because the church is a support group.

Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; (for he is faithful that promised;) And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: 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. (Heb 10:23-25)

While worship is important, encouragement and holding each other accountable is a primary function of the church. The person who feels they can worship God by themselves is missing out on an opportunity or two. That person may worship well, but when temptations come there is the very real danger that that person will succumb. It is little wonder that most of the addiction support groups model themselves on the church. An alcoholic faces his greatest dangers when he is alone. When a person has others to call when facing temptation, that person is less likely to fall prey to the devil.

But the coin has two sides. If you can worship alone, and resist temptation alone, then there is an even greater need for you to be assembling with the church. If a person is able to bear up under such circumstances, his support is in great demand. It is selfish to think that one can follow God alone. No matter how strong or weak you are, you are stronger than someone. Everyone faces their own pet sins. If another person has faced those same sins and conquered, that person needs to help the other.

Family and body

Imagine a person who says he loves his family, but refuses to go to a family reunion. He loves his parents, but never visits or calls home. That is the person who chooses not to “go to church” because he sees no value in it. He is like a child at a family gathering who spends his time standing in a corner; he misses out on the party.

The person who refuses to assemble with the church is essentially saying that family does not matter. Yes, there will be squabbles; what family does not have its fights. But when someone attacks the family they pull together. Families, good families, support each other. When everyone else seems to be down on you, family is always there to pick you up. When good things happen, family is there to encourage and celebrate. Thus the church is encouraged to “Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep.” (Rom 12:15) Sometimes we fail in this, and tend to weep more than rejoice. We often spend much time praying for those who are hurting, when we should also rejoice with those who are celebrating. But overall, family is there for whatever the need may be. That includes correction as well. If a congregation is not family, no wonder some will not worship with them. On the other hand, if the congregation

is a great family but a person refuses to assemble with them on principle, that person is missing out on one of the greatest advantages of being part of the church.

Similar to being a family, the church is a body. In fact, it is *the* body of Christ. That was Paul’s point beginning in 1 Corinthians 12:14. We are a body of which Christ is the head.

If the foot shall say, Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear shall say, Because I am not the eye, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling? (1 Cor 12:15-17)

If the hand were to cut itself off from the body it would die, and the body would be less for it. If a person chooses not to associate with the church, he will die spiritually. And the church will be less for it, because he

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would have brought his own experiences, abilities, and outlook to the body.

The person who does not want to associate with the church is telling the Lord that he does not like his body. The person that says, “Jesus yes; the church no,” is like a man who tells his wife that he loves her face, but can’t stand to look at her body. Guess where such a man will not be sleeping tonight. Even if he thinks her body has flaws, he still loves his wife (his entire wife) and wants to be with her.

To refuse to join with the church in activities can only be explained by that person not loving the people of God. But in so doing, he is rejecting God as well. “If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?” (1 John 4:20) The person who says “I can worship God just as well by myself” just may be lying to himself. If he chooses to worship by himself because he does not love those who are in the church, then he cannot worship God because God wants worship from those who love him. If he does not love God, as shown by his refusal to love the body of Christ, then his worship is not really worship at all.

God made the church for those whom he saves. Being from God, it is a blessing. It is a gift. The person who refuses the gift is really insulting the giver. Rather, accept the gift and enjoy it. It was made for that purpose.

LOW TO HIGH

The lowest point in Death Valley, and in the Western Hemisphere, is Badwater, at 282 feet (85.95 meters) below sea level. The highest point in Death Valley National Monument is Telescope Peak at 11,049 feet (3,367.7 meters) above sea level. The highest point in the contiguous United States, Mt. Whitney is 14,505 feet (4,421 meters) above sea level. The distance between Mt. Whitney and Badwater (both in Inyo County, California) is a mere 84.6 miles (136.2 km). Every July for the past 34 years there has been a race for runners from the lowest to the highest points. But then, is it any wonder that the two extremes in the “lower 48” states of the U.S. would be so close. After all, we find that true in our lives as well.

Often when we hit the lowest point in our lives, it is followed shortly thereafter by a high point. Pessimists would put it the other way around. When you hit a high point in your life, you can count on a crash to follow shortly. Our lives are rarely on an even keel for a long period of time.

God seems to have recognized this fact about us. In fact, he even incorporated it into the Jewish calendar of holy days. Five days that change the world; those are the five days between *Yom Kippur* and the beginning of *Sukkos*. (In 2011, *Yom Kippur* falls on October 8 and *Sukkos*, the Feast of Booths, lasts from October 13 to 18.)

The Day of Atonement may be the lowest day of the Jewish calendar. The day itself is a reminder of everything wrong that we have done throughout the year. Granted, it is not a total bummer, because it also offers the hope of a better year to follow; but it is generally a reminder of sin. By that day every Jewish person is expected to go to those that they might have wronged

during the year and ask for forgiveness. On that day, according to the rabbis, God seals a person’s fate for the coming year. It is a day of fasting, which makes it a low point in many people’s lives. Actually, it is more than a day of fasting. All luxuries are forbidden (which in a generation before the current one, that meant no wearing of leather shoes—something few of the young people do today at any time).

The day after *Yom Kippur* is marked by the beginning of the construction of the *sukka*, a temporary hut in which meals are to be taken during the next holiday. The strictest interpretation would even demand living in the *sukka* throughout the holiday, not just eating in it. One would almost think that this would be a continuation of the low in life; giving up your house for a week and sleeping and eating exposed to the weather. In truth, it is a build-up to the high point of the year. The Feast of Booths is sometimes simply called “The Feast.” (1 Kgs 8:2; Jn 7:10-11) Everyone seems to know that this is the party of the year. *Purim* may be characterized by more drinking and hijinks, but this is seven days of celebration and partying. The five days of the building of the *sukka*, therefore, are five days in which all of life seems to change. Mourning is turned to joy. Low becomes high. Death Valley to Mt. Whitney in a matter of five days.

Yes, God knows his creation well. We cannot understand the lows without the highs to compare them to. We cannot stay on the high points, because then we will not know them as highs. “And I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and joy in my people: and the voice of weeping shall be no more heard in her, nor the voice of crying.” (Isa 65:19)