

WHY GO TO CHURCH?

"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.

Both the Old and New Testaments contain precepts and examples for the observance of the public worship of God. Moses wrote, "When all Israel is come to appear before the Lord thy God in the place which he shall choose, thou shalt read this law before all Israel in their hearing. Gather the people together, men, and women, and children, and thy stranger that is within thy gates, that they may hear, and that they may learn, and fear the Lord your God, and observe to do all the words of this law" (Deuteronomy 31: 11-12). David said, "I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the Lord" (Psalm 122:1). Of our Lord Jesus Christ we read, "And they went into Capernaum; and straightway on the sabbath day he entered into the synagogue, and taught" (Mark 1:21). "And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up: and, as his custom was, he went into the synagogue on the sabbath day, and stood up for to read" (Luke 4:16). The fact that the Bible enjoins and Christ practiced public worship should be sufficient grounds for all Christians to be regular in church attendance.

When the epistle to the Hebrews was written, the Christians were accustomed to meeting statedly and regularly for the worship of God and the reception of the word of exhortation. However, the writer observed that it had become the habit of some to forsake their former practice of assembling regularly in the public services for the purpose of worship and of instruction in the Word of God. Having broken their good habit of church attendance, they were no longer, or only occasionally, seen in their accustomed places in the house of God. The reason for their unbecoming conduct was not stated definitely, but it was not justified.

However, the writer observed that some had forsaken their former habit of assembling regularly in their public services for the purpose of worshipping God and being instructed in His Word. Both he and the Lord were grieved that some were cultivating the habit of staying away from the church services. It is easy for anybody to form this bad habit. All that is necessary to do is to stay away once and keep it up and it will be a habit. Of course, it is much easier to make a habit than it is to break it.

God's house has ever been His place of meeting with His children, the place where they worship Him, the place where they seek counsel of God and receive instruction from Him through the proclamation of His Word, where they offer their prayers unto God and receive blessings from Him. God has ordained that His children should assemble in His house and worship Him publicly. Private worship can never take the place of public worship. In the public assembly of Christians one has fellowship with God under circumstances, in associations and in a way that is not possible in private devotions. Such communion with God is an enriching experience. God blesses His people who meet together and worship Him in a special manner.

An alarming situation presents itself in the comparatively small number of the members of our churches attending public worship with any degree of regularity. Sunday after Sunday the doors of the houses of worship are thrown open, but no acute powers of observation are needed to know that an appalling number of church members do not enter them. A far greater number pass the church doors than cross their thresholds. Proportionately church attendance has progressively declined in recent years, and threatens to decline still further in the future. Statistics indicate that in the United States not more than twenty-five per cent of the members of the evangelical churches are in any sense regular attendants upon the worship services; that fifty per cent never attend worship services, with the possible exception of Easter; and that the other twenty-five per cent find their way into some church only irregularly and infrequently. In our present society church attendance is no longer considered to be a necessary mark of respectability. Nevertheless, absenteeism from church services is the biggest blot on the

membership of the churches today. Even though multitudes of church members do not consider it important or worthwhile for them to go to church, their empty pews bear a mute testimony to the distressing condition of their souls. In view of the unmistakable evidence of their lack of spirituality, we need not be surprised or shocked by the deterioration of character which is so obvious in the lives of multitudes across our beloved nation.

Two classes of members absent themselves from the worship services in their churches -- those who are unavoidably kept away, and those who voluntarily stay away. There are many who cannot attend church services because they are sick, aged or shut-ins, and yet they love their Lord and are numbered among the mighty prayer warriors for the cause of Christ. Many others absent themselves from the worship services in their churches simply because they do not have any desire to attend. To them going to church is strictly optional. They will attend when and if they please, but they seem to think that it is not any of God's business if they do not want to go. To say the least, one takes a very low view of life when he fails to enter the house of God to engage in public worship. Church members should attend worship services unless they are providentially hindered, even when they are away from home. Why act like a heathen simply because you are on a vacation?

Today there are three kinds of church members. No matter where the church may be -- whether large or small -- you will find in it these three kinds of folks. Its power as a church and the work which it is accomplishing for the Master will be determined by the proportion of members in the different groups.

There are the "Old Faithfuls" -- heaven bless them! They are present at practically every service. If they are not, you know there is a real reason for their absence. They attend prayer meeting, contribute regularly, have a missionary vision, have an evangelistic passion and carry most of the official responsibilities. When the pastor has a task that someone must perform, he knows that if he cannot get anyone else to do it one of the "Old Faithfuls" will assume the extra burden. We need more "Old Faithfuls." Enough of them will make any church a great power for God.

The "Once-in-a-Whilers" come next. They are also known as the "Up and Downers" or the "Ins and Outers". They come one Sunday and stay away five or more. They come in different styles -- plain, assorted, indifferent and "touchy." The "touchy" ones are the critical folks. "I was sick two days and the pastor never came near." "They didn't elect me president of my class, so I'm not going any more. I'm through with the church anyway."

Then there are the "Almost Nevers." Attend on Easter, when little Willie has a part on a special program, or darling Malissa performs in the choir.

Priceless privilege is freedom of public worship. Why do so many neglect church attendance? People give all kinds of excuses. Author of Hebrews lists some reasons. One of the reasons is thoughtlessness. That is why he said, "Let us consider." Impossible for anybody to do his best for God and humanity without the strength which comes from divine worship and Christian fellowship. Another reason is selfishness. "Let us consider one another." Attend church for the sake of others. Explicit reason for non-attendance at church services is sheer bad habit, according to our text. It is a matter of custom.

Quite likely the majority of the people who stay away from church do so because they do not welcome the truth which they would hear there. A portrayal of an unselfish life is always painful to the person who has drifted into the habit of living for self alone. The warnings of the pulpit against sinful living, its ringing exhortation to

self-control, its earnest appeal to appreciate moral and spiritual values, its loving call to heroic living, generous giving and unselfish service are all unpleasant sounds to the person who wants to live as he pleases. God's man is responsible for delivering His message to His people even though it may be unpleasant to them. Many things that are most needful and very helpful are not pleasant to those receiving them, such as correction, discipline, medication and surgery. After all, from what scripture did anybody ever get the idea that the task of any preacher is to entertain or amuse? The mission of God's preacher is the proclamation of God's message to his hearers and not the entertainment or amusement of the people. For this reason, when I hear somebody expressing dissatisfaction with his pastor, and talking about what he ought to do and how he ought to preach, it is a pleasure to remind him that the duty of a minister is to feed the sheep and not to amuse the goats. After all, when a person who can't do something himself tells how it ought to be done he merely exposes his ignorance and advertises his lack of ability and experience.