

Question: Do Christians have to go to church every time the church meets? What would Jesus say?

To understand why Christians meet together with the church regularly, we need to examine what is taught in the New Testament letter to the Hebrews. Four times the Hebrew writer used the words “let us”: “let us draw near to God,” “let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess,” “let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds” and “let us not give up meeting together” (Hebrews 10:22-25). Each of these is an appeal to the hearts of Christians. Thus, any discussion of the assembling of the church should not be approached as something Christians “have to” do. Instead, meeting regularly with the church is seen as an opportunity to participate in blessings from God. Those who do not see these things as blessings do not willingly respond to these appeals. Let’s examine these appeals more closely.

The appeal “let us not give up meeting together,” is the key to fulfilling the previous three appeals. While we can “draw near to God” and “hold to our hope” through private worship, the regular gathering with the church is designed to enhance a Christian’s nearness to God and his hope of eternal life in his presence. The church engaged in singing, prayers, communion and study of God’s word can take these gathered believers to a level of spirituality that they may miss if they do not have this interaction with one another. At the same time, private worship is important to their worship together as a church. Private worship of God provides something to share with other Christians when they come together.

The third appeal “let us spur one another on toward love and good works” can be achieved only by Christians meeting with one another. Love and service toward God and toward one another is at the heart of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. Jesus said: “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35). Beginning with the words “Love must be sincere” (Romans 12:9), the apostle Paul gave a list of instructions about Christian attitudes and actions toward one another. In addition, the apostle John taught that to relate to the God we have not seen we must learn to love our brothers and sisters in Christ whom we have seen (1 John 4:20-21). This is an important part of meeting with the church. It provides an opportunity to find love, encouragement, grace, help, forgiveness, hope and peace. Among fellow-believers

in the assembly of the church, one can find living examples of faith in both good times and times of trial. One can also find loving Christians to challenge her to become more than she may have thought possible. All of this and more is possible with the help of our Lord and of our fellow-believers who share with us in life's daily struggles.

The biblical appeal "not give up meeting together" is not a command to never miss any specific church gathering. Instead, it is a loving appeal to not forsake the habit of regularly meeting with God's family as one has the ability and opportunity. It is an appeal based on the blessings that can come from Christians meeting together.

I understand that the people who make up our churches are often not what they should be. Obviously, this hinders the fulfillment of God's purpose for the church. We need to see the church as a people in the process of becoming like Jesus. They have not yet fully become what Jesus intends. The problems in the church will not be solved by Christians abandoning the practice of assembling. As long as they continue to draw near to their Lord and lovingly help one another, our Lord Jesus can amazingly accomplish his grand purposes among them.

Jesus would not say "going to church every time the doors open" is a "have to" matter. But he would teach us about the purpose and benefits that can come from assembling with fellow-believers. A "have to" attitude can lead to a spirit of resentment. With that attitude, one may be present in body but absent in heart because he/she does not want to be there. Jesus has encouraged his followers to serve God everyday out of a sincere faith and love from the heart instead of trying to meet legalistic demands about what they "have to" do (Romans 7:6).

[Send questions or comments to University Church of Christ, 801 N. 12th, Murray, KY 42071 or phone 270-753-1881. This article is reproduced on the web: universitychurchmurray.com] 2016/11/04