

Worshipping Online Is Not Assembling with the Saints

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In the first century, Christians in local churches regularly gathered together. This is evident in 1 Cor. 5:4-5, where Paul instructs the Corinthian Christians to disfellowship a certain impenitent sinner "when you are assembled." He takes for granted that they will be meeting together and will do so soon enough that no instruction is needed to ensure that the matter will be addressed with sufficient promptness. In 1 Cor. 11:18-22 he rebukes them for the fact that "when [they] come together as a church" they were improperly celebrating the Lord's Supper. In 1 Cor. 14:19, 28, and 35, he mentions speaking and being silent "in church," referring to the congregational gathering, and in 14:23-25, he hypothesizes a situation in which "the whole church comes together" and unbelievers enter that assembly. In 1 Cor. 14:26, he speaks of various activities that are done "when you come together." In 1 Cor. 14:33b-34, he refers to a restriction on female speech in congregational assemblies, and he points out that those restrictions apply to all Christian congregations, indicating that all local Christian communities had such assemblies. In Jas. 2:2, James assumes the Christians to whom he writes regularly assemble, as he states, "For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing *comes into your assembly*, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, . . ." In Acts 20:7 the Christians are gathered together on the first day of the week to share in the Lord's Supper ("to break bread"), the day of the week called "the Lord's day" in Rev. 1:10. And the writer of Hebrews refers to Christian assemblies in Heb. 10:25 (more on that below).

This practice of assembling regularly is confirmed by the earliest noncanonical Christian writings. For example, Clement wrote in the late first century (*1 Clem.* 36:4), "And let us therefore, *conscientiously gathering together* in harmony, cry to Him earnestly, as with one mouth, that we may be made partakers of His great and glorious promises." In the *Didache*, a document from the late first or early second century, Christians are told (Did. 9.1-3) to "*come together* each Lord's Day of the Lord, break bread, and give thanks." In the *Epistle of Barnabas*, another document from the late first or early second century, Christians are told (Barnabas 4.10), "*assemble yourselves together.*" Justin Martyr testifies in the mid-second century (*1 Apol.* 67), "And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country *gather together to one place*, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits." Outside of Christian writings, Pliny the Younger, a Roman governor of Bithynia, reported to Emperor Trajan in the early second century (Pliny, *Ep.* 10.96) that Christians "were *accustomed to meet* on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god."

Christians are prohibited from ceasing to attend their congregational gatherings. The Spirit says in Heb. 10:24-25, "And let us consider one another for stimulation of love and good works, ²⁵ **not neglecting** [or abandoning or forsaking] **our own assembly, as [is the] habit [of] some, but encouraging [one another]**, and all the more as you see the Day approaching." Rather than neglect the gatherings of the saints, an inherently discouraging action, they are to encourage one another through participation in those gatherings. Withdrawing from church

meetings is not a matter solely between the individual and God. It has potentially deleterious consequences for fellow believers.

The subject of this brief note is whether watching a congregational assembly online, even if one participates to the fullest extent possible, qualifies as attending the assembly within the meaning of the Hebrews text. Is it an adequate substitute for physical presence so that one is justified in concluding that God is satisfied with it? I do not believe it is. I think those who are *able to attend* the congregational assembly, who are not subject to extenuating circumstances, but *choose* instead to view it online are disobeying God and depriving the body of blessings that he intends to give through them.

To not neglect the congregational assembly in the sense meant by the writer of Hebrews is to be present in that assembly in a way that allows one to encourage others who are present. That is the import of the contrast: not neglecting our own assembly . . . but encouraging one another. Those who view the assembly online are imperceptible to those who are physically present; they cannot be seen, heard, or felt by them. Therefore, the "virtually present" have no capacity to encourage during the assembly those who are physically present. In that regard, they are no different from those who are absent but are not watching online.

In contrast, those who are physically present are able to encourage others in various ways, meaning they are able to inspire them with hope, courage, and confidence and to spur them on to faithfulness and good works. They do so not only through the smiles, handshakes, hugs, and words exchanged in personal conversations but also through expressing to God in song and prayer (including the amen) his unrivaled greatness and glory, through publicly acknowledging and proclaiming God's love and grace in the atoning death of his Son by participating in the Lord's Supper, and through honoring God's word as it is presented by being attentive and affirming of its absolute truthfulness. The list is not exhaustive, but all of these actions reinforce for those who can perceive them what God has revealed in Scripture and thus can strengthen others in those truths, which inspires and spurs them on to steadfast faith in this fallen world.

None of this can be done by one who is watching the assembly online. Therefore, in the absence of circumstances that militate against physical attendance, to choose to worship online is to neglect the assembly contrary to the instruction of Heb. 10:25. It is to refuse to make oneself available as an instrument of God's blessing to others. The point is not to create anxiety over every assessment of extenuating circumstances but to make clear that worshiping online is no substitute for physical presence. Many situations may warrant not attending an assembly, but that is different from assuming that no extenuating circumstances are needed, that being "virtually present" is equivalent in God's eyes to being physically present. That is not the case. When one is "able" to attend, with whatever ambiguity is involved in that qualification, God expects one to attend.