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## On "Going to Church"

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John Mark Hicks

The number of “unchurched” people is growing in our American culture. Only about 20 percent of Americans attend a worship assembly on Sunday mornings. As people become more distant to “church culture,” they are losing their acquaintance with the vitality and transcendent purpose of “going to church.” Indeed, even some who do attend have lost it. “Church” has become a mere social experience (“I have friends there”), a familial obligation (“Grandmom is there”), a form of entertainment (“I enjoy the choir”), a duty to be performed (“I’m obeying God’s command to assemble”), or a source of security (“I feel comfortable there”). While many of us have not reduced our motivation for gathering to those social conventions, unless we understand the significance of “going to church” we are never very far from some kind of reductionism. What does “going to church” mean? Why should we “go to church,” anyway? What happens “at church” that is so important?

### All of Life is Worship

There is a sense in which the phrase “going to church” is unfortunate. If it means that we go to an assembly where the people of God are gathered to worship God, then the phrase is harmless because in that sense we do “go to church.” However, I fear that to most people the phrase means something different. It has the subtle effect of segregating daily life (Monday through Saturday) from Sunday religion. It tends to promote a dichotomy between life and worship, between secular and sacred. It compart-

mentalizes “church” into one sphere and “life” into another, so that there is little relationship between the two. “Worship,” or “going to church,” becomes identified exclusively with Sunday assemblies. Some, then, think that they are dedicated servants of God if they are simply present for their congregation’s worship on most Sundays. In that sense, the phrase “going to church” is unfortunate.

Worship is much more than the corporate assembly. Worship is the submission and sacrifice of our lives for the purpose of glorying God in everything that we do; it is our total life response to God’s creative and redemptive acts. Worship is the orientation of our very beings through the recognition of who we are as God’s people—a people he has created to share communion with him. Everything about our lives is oriented and dedicated to the glory and honor of God. All of life is worship because all of life is devoted to God’s glory.

The concept of all of life as worship is a consistent theme in the New Testament. Perhaps the most significant text for that understanding is Rom 12:1–2:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing, and perfect will.



Paul parallels the Old Testament offering of a sacrificial animal—an act of worship—with the offering of our own bodies as, likewise, an act of worship. In response to what God has done, in view of his mercy, we offer ourselves—our bodies, the whole of our lives—to God as our response of worship. That involves our transformation according to the pattern of God’s will, as we live out that pattern over against the pattern of the world.

Paul also speaks of our transformation according to the pattern of Christ’s image (Rom 8:29–30). Consequently, he is able to talk about every aspect of our lives as dedicated to God’s glory and honor. “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God” (1 Cor 10:31). Paul virtually repeats himself in Col 3:17: “Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” Those texts certainly affirm that all of life is worship. Everything we say or do is offered as a sacrifice to God’s glory. Paul has extended the sacrificial language of the Old Testament to include the whole of the believer’s life.

In fact, ministry (e.g., benevolent activity) is as much worship as is singing praises to God or confessing Jesus with our lips. Both praise and benevolence are sacrifices to God; both are described in Heb 13:15–16 with liturgical language:

Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.

There is no essential liturgical/sacrificial difference between praising God with our lips and sharing our possessions with others. Both are sacrifices to God. Both are worship. Whether I am singing praises to God as part of a corporate assembly or buying a homeless person a meal, I am worshipping God. Whether I am confessing the name of Jesus through song in an assembly or helping a widow pay her rent, I am worshipping God. Our lives are our worshipful response to God. Religion is not merely “going to church”; rather, it is living lives worthy of the gospel according to the pattern that God has shown us in Jesus Christ (Phil 1:27).

Sometimes the New Testament principle (“all of life is worship”) is said to be in contrast to the concept of

worship in the Old Testament. That is unfortunate and misleading. When Old Testament worshippers offered their sacrifices, they offered lambs, goats, doves, or some other gift to God. Those gifts were symbols of broken hearts and devoted lives. The animal sacrifices represented the sacrifice of the worshippers’ own lives. In the absence of a holy lifestyle, any particular act of animal sacrifice was meaningless. Even in the Old Testament, all of life was

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worship.

For example, Psalm 40 reflects what God truly wants when his worshippers come before him—lives dedicated to do his will (40:6–8):

Sacrifice and offering you did not desire,  
but my ears you have pierced;  
burnt offerings and sin offerings  
you did not require.

Then I said, “Here I am, I have come—  
it is written about me in the scroll.

I desire to do your will, O my God;  
your law is within my heart.”

Another example is found in Micah 6. Here, God prosecutes Judah for her failure to keep the law despite God’s redemptive actions at the Red Sea and at the Jordan River (“Gilgal”). God lodges a “charge against Israel” (Mic 6:2). The people respond by asking, “With what shall I come before the Lord and bow down before the exalted God?” (Mic 6:6). What does God want? they ask. Burnt offerings, or thousands of rams, or rivers of oil? Does he want my firstborn son (as worshippers of Molech offered)? No, Micah declares. God has already told you what he wants (Mic 6:8):



He has showed you, O man, what is good.  
 And what does the Lord require of you?  
 To act justly and to love mercy  
 and to walk humbly with your God.

Just as God did not accept the solemn assemblies of the people of Israel because their lives did not reflect God's life (cf. Isa 1:10–17; Amos 5:21–27; Jer 7:1–15), so also when we "go to church" God will not accept our praises if

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our lives have not reflected his character throughout the week. What does God want us to offer him? He wants lives that are dedicated to justice, mercy, and faithfulness ("the weightier matters of the law," Matt 23:23). The sacrifices we bring (the praises we offer) are meaningless unless such lives lie behind our specific acts of worship.

### The Worship Assembly

While all of life is worship, there is still a special sense in which worship takes place in the corporate assembly of God's people. The people of God gather to worship him. That dual sense of worship—one referring to all of life and the other referring to the assembly of God's people—is present in the Old Testament. Psalm 40:6–8, as noted above, teaches that our obedient lives are sacrifices to God's honor, but it also anticipates that God's people will gather to praise him. The psalmist testifies to God's grace in the assembly of God's people (Ps 40:9–10):

I proclaim righteousness in the great assembly;  
 I do not seal my lips, as you know, O Lord.  
 I do not hide your righteousness in my heart;  
 I speak of your faithfulness and salvation.  
 I do not conceal your love and your truth  
 from the great assembly.

The psalmist expresses his confidence in God and praises God in the assembly of God's people. There he testifies to God's righteousness and faithfulness. There he testifies to God's rescuing him from the "slimy pit" (Ps 40:2) and his giving him a new song of praise, which he sings in the great assembly (Ps 40:3). Psalm 40—and the Old Testament in general—holds the tension between "all of life is worship" and "the worship assembly" in wonderful balance. It is not an either/or dichotomy, but a both/and reality.

When the people of Israel gathered as a "great assembly," they remembered the "day of assembly" (Deut 4:10; 9:10; 18:16)—the day Israel entered into covenant with God at Mount Sinai (Exod 19–24). On that day Israel became an "assembly" of God, a "congregation" of God (cf. Acts 7:38). In light of their covenant with God, the people of Israel gathered regularly in "holy assemblies." Leviticus 23 and Numbers 28–29 detail the different kinds of "holy assemblies" to which Israel was called, including the Sabbath, the Passover, the Feast of Weeks, the Feast of Trumpets, the Feast of Tabernacles, and the Day of Atonement. Israel also gathered as an assembly at special times, such as for donations to the Tabernacle (Exod 35:1–29) or the Temple (1 Chron 29:1–9), the dedication of the Temple (2 Chron 5:2, 3; 6:3, 12, 18; 7:8), and covenant renewals (2 Chron 29:23–32; 30:2, 4, 13, 17, 21–25; Neh 8:1, 18). God created Israel as a people for himself and put his dwelling place in the midst of her assembly (cf. Lev 26:11–12). Indeed, Israel was destined to be an "assembly of peoples" (Gen 28:3; 35:11; 48:4), of which all nations would eventually be a part. The prophets of Israel saw a day when all the nations would gather with Israel in Jerusalem to worship as a great assembly (cf. Isa 2:2–3; 60:3–5; Zech 14:16).

Worship assemblies, then, were integral to the life of Israel. The Psalms often presuppose a gathering of God's people. Indeed, the Psalter was the hymnbook or prayer book of the assemblies of Israel (see Pss 22:22, 25; 26:12; 35:18; 89:5; 107:32; 111:1). The Psalms charge God's people, "Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise in the assembly of his saints" (Ps 149:1). Or, "Praise God in the great congregation; praise the Lord in the assembly of Israel" (Ps 68:26). In the assembly, as God's Old Covenant church, Israel entered the presence of God, or, as the Hebrew literally says, Israel went "before the face of God" (cf. Deut 26:10; 1 Sam 1:19; Ezek 46:3, 9; Pss 22:27; 86:9; 1 Chron 16:29; 2 Chron 20:18). Psalms 95–100 illustrate



this emphasis. We come before the “face” of God when we gather to worship him (Pss 95:2; 96:6, 9, 13; 98:6, 9; 100:2); we enter the presence of God.

God is both the subject and the object of our worship. As subject, God makes himself present to us; as object, God receives our worship. Worship is that entrance into the presence of God where communion is experienced. From the worship of Israel, the nations would learn to come and fall down and worship before the face of God. In like manner, they now learn through the worship of the church. Christians invite all nations to “go to church” with them.

The New Testament concept of “church” is partly rooted in the Old Testament idea of “assembly.” Heb 12:18–21 reminds us that Israel gathered on its “day of assembly” at Mount Sinai in the presence of God. The church, too, gathers in the presence of God—but with even greater significance. We gather as his eschatological community (Heb 12:22–24):

But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

When we, as the people of God, assemble, we do so in God’s presence. The assembly becomes holy ground. We draw near to God by entering his heavenly dwelling place

through the blood of Jesus Christ (Heb 10:19–25). We enter the city of the living God where thousands of angels and the spirits of the faithful are gathered around the throne of God. With saints around the world, we enter heaven itself to worship God.

### Conclusion

The assembly of God’s people in his presence anticipates a future assembly around God’s throne, when he will fully dwell with his people in the new Jerusalem on the new heaven and the new earth (Rev 21:1–4). There we shall see the face of God and serve him day and night. Revelation 7 provides a picture of this eschatological gathering, where “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language” stands before the throne of God (7:9). This great multitude cries in a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb” (7:10). They have had their robes washed in the blood of the Lamb (7:14), and “they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them” (7:15).

When the people of God gather, we experience the presence of God. We honor God with our praise. We remember the history of God’s involvement with his people, and we anticipate heaven’s eschatological assembly. We are mutually encouraged by being together in God’s presence. That is why we “go to church.”

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