

Why the Sabbath Command to Assemble?

Assembling each Sabbath is a Bible command. This instruction also carries a prophesied end-time warning. Why does God require it? Does it matter with whom you assemble? Is any “Church of God” group good enough? What should you do?

BY DAVID C. PACK

ACTS 2:1 RECORDS an historic scene: The New Testament Church is about to come into existence. Luke writes, “they were all with one accord in one place.” This annual Sabbath of Pentecost proves to be an event not to be missed or to be late for. Peter gives a powerful sermon. Miracles are recorded. The Holy Spirit is given. After repentance is explained, thousands request baptism. About 3,000 are “called” (vs. 39) and “gladly receive his [Peter’s] word” (vs. 41). Probably the largest single group baptism in history occurs. The *New Testament Church* is born!

What did this signify—what did it mean? Of course, the Church of God was established, but what else? Even in its infancy there were clues. Allow the Bible to answer.

Our First Glimpse of the Church

What did this new Church look like? The first answers come immediately: “...And they continued steadfastly in

the *apostles’ doctrine and fellowship*” (Acts 2:42).

Why is this significant? The two earliest and most defining features of God’s Church are evident: (1) steadfastness in the apostles’ doctrine, and (2) FELLOWSHIP. Then, after verse 43 explains that the fear of God is apparent in “every soul,” verse 44 adds, “...all that believed were *together*.” Verse 46 also states that they continued to be of “one accord [agreement],” meeting together “daily” in various houses in “singleness of heart.”

The Church of God was unified.

Looking for an Excuse?

Ask yourself: What is the most terrible, intense trial that could ever strike God’s Church?

Most would agree that it was when the Church fell into the hands of false leaders. This happened in our generation, at the end of the 20th century. All converted people who lived through this time understand the personal and collective pain and confusion that false leaders were able to cause the Church.

Yet, can *unfaithful* leaders alter Christ’s charge to *faithful* members, who, having refused to compromise,

find themselves having to search out where they can continue “steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship”?

If others jump off a cliff, should you? Many have concluded, “*Men* lied to me, so I no longer have to obey *God*.” Yet, does *another’s unfaithfulness* change *your responsibility* to obey God?

Of course NOT!

Godly habits, character and practices must never be corrupted by the unrighteous behavior of others (I Cor. 15:33-34)!

There are three obvious ways that Satan has assaulted God’s truth in our time. First, with some doctrines, he overtly replaced them with something false. Second, he ensured that certain other doctrines were simply never spoken of again. They disappeared by omission and “died” of benign neglect in the minds of many. Third, with still other doctrines, he gutted and destroyed them from the inside out, until there was little or nothing left.

Many are no longer able to understand how to properly keep God’s Sabbath, a doctrine that falls into the third category.

The Sabbath has been, and always will be, the test command (Ex. 31:13-17). No one can forget how often Herbert W. Armstrong taught this principle derived from Exodus 16.

Another False Idea Enters

Many would-be “leaders” promote the false idea that you must no longer regularly attend Sabbath services.

They preach a smooth counterfeit: “Everyone is on his own...The Work is over...We must do the best we can by attending wherever we can...You may even be safest by staying at home on the Sabbath.

These “leaders” understand that the Bible foretold problems in the Church, and they flatter people with what they *want* to hear—not what they *need* to hear. Instead of resolving brethren’s problems, they increase them!

Certain verses are usually cited and twisted to support a “do-it-yourself” approach to Church attendance and Christianity:

Daniel 12:7: The holy people are to be “scattered.”

John 10:12: Wolves “catch and scatter” the sheep.

Ezekiel 34:2-10: False shepherds scatter rather than feed the sheep.

Finally, Matthew 18:20: “For where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them.” (Beginning in verse 15, the context of this last verse is entirely about offenses that two or three brothers in Christ are trying to resolve. And verse 20 is a statement about the Church’s role in resolving brethren’s differences. This entire passage has nothing to do with Sabbath attendance.)

Do not believe *any* of these ideas. They are all false and do not square with the many other plain Bible verses about assembling together. Though they are certainly prophetic of what happened in the Church, they were never intended to be *self-fulfilling* prophecies. God prophesied that many terrible things would occur in people’s character in the end-time. This is certainly not a license to practice them!

God’s purpose and intent for His faithful servants is that they remain together, believe the full truth, submit to His government and actively continue His Work (Matt. 24:14, 44-45; 28:19-20; Ezek. 33:7-9; Isa. 62:6).

A Vital Warning

Hebrews 10 states, “Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering...Not forsaking the assembling of

ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as you see the day approaching. For if we sin willfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remains no more sacrifice for sins” (vs. 23, 25-26).

Let’s take a closer look. Several points are important in this passage: (1) The context is *holding fast*. (2) This must be done without wavering, or going back and forth. (3) We must *never stop assembling*. (4) *Some do* adopt this approach to Sabbath attendance. (5) We are to *exhort others* to attend. (6) It is “so much the more” important as we “see the *day* [of Christ’s Return] *approaching*.” And finally, (7) this is in the context of a direct *warning against willful sin*—leaving “no more sacrifice for sins.”

Christ’s sacrifice does not permit us to override true knowledge. This is unforgivable. Notice that in Hebrews 4:9, the apostle Paul reminded God’s people that “There remains therefore a rest [*Sabbatismos*: Margin—keeping of the Sabbath] to the people of God.”

Authority for Requiring Assembly

By what authority must people assemble every Sabbath?

God instructed Moses to write, “...the feasts of the LORD, which you shall proclaim to be HOLY CONVOCATIONS, even these are My feasts. Six days shall work be done: but the *seventh day* is the *Sabbath* of rest, an HOLY CONVOCATION; you shall do no work therein: it is the Sabbath of the LORD in all your dwellings” (Lev. 23:2-3).

The Hebrew word for “holy convocation” is *miqra*, which means “something called out, an assembly, a reading.” This is a *commanded assembly*. God’s Church has always understood and taught this meaning. It is inseparable from the overall keeping of the Sabbath—and is as important as “resting” and “[doing] no work therein.”

If Sabbath assembly is optional, then what is the point of Hebrews 10:23-26? WHY do we need to assemble? What are the purposes for this command?

In John 21:15-17, Christ bluntly told Peter (three times) that, if Peter loved Him, he would “FEED My sheep.” It is evident that this admonition was not lost on Peter. Later in his ministry, Peter instructed elders to “FEED the flock of God which is among you” (I Pet. 5:2).

Paul admonished the assembled elders at Ephesus in the same way: “Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to FEED the Church of God, which He has purchased with His own blood” (Acts 20:28).

God’s ministers can never take this lightly. Yet, how could God command His ministers to feed sheep who were *not* commanded to attend and eat the spiritual food?

Here is why God has ordained a ministry: “For the *perfecting* of the saints, for the *work* of the ministry, for the *edifying* of the body of Christ: till we all come in the *unity of the faith*, and of the *knowledge* of the Son of God, unto a *perfect man*, unto the measure of the stature of the *fullness of Christ*: that we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; but speaking the *truth in love*, may *grow up* into Him in all things” (Eph. 4:12-15; also read I Cor. 12:28-29).

Why Assembling Builds Faith

There is another critical aspect of Sabbath assembly that is little understood. As you listen to sermons, sermonettes, Bible studies and news of the Work, something is quietly happening within you.

Let’s understand!

Notice what Paul wrote to the Romans: “How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear *without a preacher*?” (Rom. 10:14). Yes, ministers are required so that people can be properly led within the truth.

Yet, members also have responsibilities toward the Church.

In Acts 8:31, the Ethiopian eunuch answers the deacon Philip's question, "Understand you what you read?" with his own question: "How can I, except some man should *guide me*?" In this question he sought help. It took humility to admit that he did not "know it all." Yet, the context shows that he was familiar with Isaiah's writings and must have had his own personal copy. Like the eunuch, you must be willing to let God's Church teach you.

Paul continues in Romans, "And how shall they preach, except they be *sent*?" (10:15). God's ministers are always sent by His faithful Headquarters. They never come of their own authority, in rebellion to God's chosen leadership.

Paul continues further, "...as it is written, How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things! But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah said, Lord, who has believed our report? *So then faith comes by hearing*, and hearing by the WORD OF GOD" (Rom. 10:15-17).

Listening to God's instruction through His true servants is a faith-building exercise. Have you realized this before?

God's Word is living—dynamic! It is not sterile or useless to those who hear it. When sitting in Sabbath services, you are not simply "marking time," you are *growing in faith*—if you are actively engaged in every word that is being spoken.

The biggest reason we are to assemble on God's Sabbath is to be spiritually *nourished with* the pure word of truth and "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27 NKJ). This is one of the most important ways that your faith is strengthened.

The next time you approach Sabbath services, remember this vital principle and how it works within the mind of a converted person!

To Praise God

The second reason God's people must assemble together is perhaps best sum-

marized by three verses in Psalms: "Let them exalt Him also in the *congregation of the people*" (107:32), "Sing unto the LORD a new song, and His praise in the *congregation of saints*" (149:1), and "God is greatly to be feared in the *assembly of the saints*, and to be had in reverence of all them that are about Him" (89:7).

These scriptures show that we come together to sing praises to God as we learn to fear and reverence Him—and we are to do this with other brethren, assembled as the Church.

Many in God's Church are not good singers. Usually what comes out is closer to noise than music. But do you at least strive to "make a joyful noise" to God during Sabbath singing? Take a moment to read three places that emphasize how important this is to God. In fact, He *commands* you to sing (Psa. 81:1; 95:1-2; 98:4)!

We must never sing less than whole-heartedly before God. Daydreaming, mumbling or not participating at all violates these verses. They show neither reverence nor honor for God on the day that is intended to be a "sign" between Him and His people (Ezek. 20:12-13).

True Fellowship

The third purpose for attending Sabbath services is to enjoy right, godly fellowship. It is a weekly opportunity for those who fear God to speak "often one to another" (Mal. 3:16).

This is one reason the New Testament records so many accounts of the brethren being "together" (I Cor. 5:4; 11:18; Acts 20:1-6).

What about your little congregation? Are you still at the stage where you feel that you are like Archippus, "the Church in your [or someone's] house" (Phm. 2), or as Paul wrote to the Romans of Priscilla and Aquila, "the Church that is in their house" (Rom. 16:5)? Are there just 3, 5, 10 or 15 of you? Do not forget that Lot was completely *alone*. Like Lot, you may be among a very few scattered in the "Sodom" of this world, but you are very important to God.

Be careful not to "despise the day of small things" (Zech. 4:10). While the Church will grow larger, the New Testament era will almost certainly end as it started—many little home churches full of fervent people. But in this age, because a pastor or elder cannot be present, they may have to huddle around a tape player to be fed God's precious truth.

Treasure your group—no matter its size. Love, serve and pray for those in it, and take advantage of opportunities to fellowship with other brethren when available. The Church is striving to do its part so that the brethren can develop relationships across the country and throughout the world.

Remember to pray for isolated brethren who have *no one* to meet with. To those who cannot reach a group yet, be steadfast. Fellowship is probably coming. We are trying, with God's help, to start groups wherever possible.

On a Related Note

No doubt, you appreciate our elders. *Tell* them so. Do not assume others will. There are only a small number at this time, so please understand that the earth is just as big for us as it was when almost 2,000 were sharing the same responsibility 20 years ago. We serve willingly, even eagerly, but great distances challenge all in The Restored Church of God. For a time, "necessity is laid upon us." God knows this, and in time He will add more brethren.

In the meantime, we wish to be the best "helpers of your joy" that we can possibly be (II Cor. 1:24).

A Matter of Trust!

In the early days of Mr. Armstrong's ministry, zealous brethren understood their responsibility to drive to wherever the nearest pastor was holding services. This often meant traveling great distances. Sometimes it also meant staying overnight with friends. The brethren understood that hospitality was needed by their fellow brethren, and they gladly extended it. For many brethren, travel expenses were a serious budget item.

Circumstances have changed.

Today, God is often calling “old pros” in the faith—proven veterans who, in many cases, have “fought the good fight” for decades. Brethren who attend a small group have a special responsibility to show an example of faithful steadfastness and reliability.

Have you considered that God is concerned that nothing “new” will be introduced when an ordained person is not present? You should demonstrate that we are “Rooted and built up in Him, and stablished in the faith, *as you have been taught*, abounding therein with thanksgiving” (Col. 2:7).

There is always a danger that divisive, heretical or rebellious people will try to come among us. Our small, scattered ministry does not allow us to watch for this danger as closely as we would wish. *You* have to identify them, possibly sometimes having to also alert Headquarters to their activities. Circumstances will make this rare, but it could happen. Just be sure that you are not overly focusing on finding this where it does not exist.

In this regard, generally avoid those who have left. Almost invariably, they fall into the category described in the previous paragraph. When they left, they did this knowing who and what we are. With knowledge, they made a conscious choice to leave. They will almost certainly try to convince you to do the same. In some curious and carnal way, those who leave attempt to validate their decision by trying to pull others out with them. Like misery—heresy, division and rebellion love company.

When New Brethren Come

New brethren (from either the world or a “splinter” group) who wish to come with us should be referred to Headquarters or an elder so that they can be introduced to and officially welcomed into the Body. Remember: “Let all things be done decently and in order” (I Cor. 14:40).

We can never introduce strange beliefs and ideas from outside sources. In The Restored Church of God, we teach as we have been taught, and do not pass out different organiza-

tions’ tapes and literature like trading baseball cards! We *never* engage in religious hobbyism. The unity of The Restored Church of God is based on the foundation “stone” of Jesus Christ (Eph. 2:20), who, during Mr. Armstrong’s 50-plus-year ministry, “restored all things” to His Church.

If you are searching for the truth, compare us with others. But, when the Church of God assembles for worship and fellowship on the Sabbath, it is not for the purpose of engaging in doctrinal debate with representatives or people of other groups. This is why Mr. Armstrong instructed the ministry to invite people to services only after they understand who we are.

Here are some types of people who should *not* attend with The Restored Church of God:

(1) Those who do not want or believe that God’s government is in the Church.

(2) Those who do not want to do the Work.

(3) Those who wish to make exceptions to the understanding that Philadelphians “hold fast” to the full truth.

(4) Those who do not believe the one true Church doctrine and who wish to “hop around” from group to group and organization to organization.

(5) Those who do not want to pay God’s tithes, or wish to spread them between groups.

(6) Those who do not wish to be actively taught or corrected.

(7) Those who do not wish to be part of Christ’s on-going final gathering process (Matt. 12:30) of faithful brethren, because they believe that the true Church is now prophesied to remain scattered until the Great Tribulation.

(8) Those who do not believe that Mr. Armstrong fulfilled the role of Elijah, or understand what his fulfillment *means* to the Church.

These people are not considered disfellowshipped unless they are trying to harm or divide us. They simply may not attend with us. We do not have an open-door policy.

But Only With the Living, Active Church

To those who are unsure about coming with The Restored Church of God, do not misunderstand the point of this article! You cannot please God *and* assemble with leaders who compromise. That would *not* please God! Consider II John 7-10, Titus 3:9-11 and Romans 16:17.

Notice this powerful statement approved by Mr. Armstrong:

“You can be part of God’s true Church by earnestly repenting of your sins—disobedience to GOD’S LAWS—by asking God to cover your sins through the blood of Jesus Christ, by calling on God’s true servants to baptize you, and by claiming God’s promise of the gift of His Holy Spirit. In that way, and that way ONLY, does anyone enter into the true Church.

“Church attendance is not the most important thing! Church attendance does not, by itself, mean CHURCH MEMBERSHIP in God’s sight! Some people view ‘church going’ as an end in itself. But it most definitely is not.

“God expressly forbids His people ever to join in with the worship of counterfeit church bodies—no matter how ‘close’ to the truth they might seem! Only the genuine worship of God with His TRUE Church is acceptable to Him!

“You need to thoroughly EXAMINE YOURSELF. YOU NEED TO BE SURE!

“Your eternal salvation is at stake! May God help you to heed this warning!”

“Short Questions,” *Plain Truth*, April 1968

Here is another quote showing what the Church has understood and believed on this matter since the 1950s:

“The fallen ‘woman’ of Rev. 17 is clearly identified as the great false Church...

“Notice Rev. 17:5: she is called ‘BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS.’ She is a MOTHER church. She has daughter churches...They came out of her, in protest, calling

themselves 'Protestant.' They, like their mother church, participate in the governments and politics and affairs of this world. Thus they reject the Government of God! This (verse 2) is the cause of her fall from grace...It is an ORGANIZED SYSTEM, even though divided into hundreds of sectarian organizations. Shall the true Christian JOIN, and thus become a part of this apostate system?

"The Bible does not say we are to assemble with the world, but with OURSELVES—those who are truly converted.

"Neither are we to assemble on Saturday with an apostatizing Church which sees the argument about the Sabbath but which...rejects the gospel of the kingdom of God. God is not in these churches. They merely assemble themselves together, by their own authority...

"Withdraw at once from all other fellowship, except that of CHRIST, and those who are IN CHRIST, and Christ IN THEM"

A True History of the True Church
Radio Church of God,
1959, pp. 28-29

After the apostasy, many left our former affiliation to simply stay home on the Sabbath because they *are* aware of what happened, but are confused as to what to *do* about it. Some plan to stay at home, period. Pray for them. Others are searching for where Christ's voice of truth and his *true* Work has re-emerged. Gently encourage them.

To those who may read this, but are not with us, understand the following: You cannot go it alone. If any limb of the body is severed (arm, leg, hand, finger), it will still live for a little

while—but *only* for a little while. It will die, unless it is successfully grafted back onto the body: "I am the true vine, and My Father is the husbandman...Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can you, except you abide in Me" (Jn. 15:1, 4).

This passage speaks to any who might try to have a "just you and me, God" attitude. (See I Corinthians 12:12-20.)

Other Guidelines

Here are additional points to assembling on the Sabbath:

(1) Do not just be on time—*be early!*

(2) Remember that your dress reflects your attitude toward what it means to be in God's presence. Are you in your *best*? Men, when possible, should always wear a suit or jacket and tie. Ladies should dress in "modest apparel" (I Tim. 2:9) and in a dress.

(3) Is there some way in which you can serve? For example, could you pick someone up who needs a ride to services?

(4) When fellowshipping in the home of brethren, please do not stay too long! Ask the host for a guideline, or make a limit of about 90 minutes. Some stay so long that *after* a potluck is served, they find themselves getting hungry *again!*—a sure sign they have overstayed!

Some Final Points

Try to always focus on reasons to *attend* Sabbath services—not excuses to *miss* them. Here are excuses turned into reasons to attend:

(1) "I feel discouraged." This is really a great reason to go, not to stay home.

(2) "There's no minister there." Yes there is, he is just *on tape*.

(3) "I'm tired." Go to services anyway. Recharge your *spiritual batteries*.

(4) "We are really all on our own." Reread this article if this is still your thinking.

(5) "It is just too far." If true, how about going every 2-3 weeks?

(6) "My car is not in the best condition." Plan ahead. You may be able to get a ride.

(7) "I've got a headache." How bad is it? Is it bad enough to miss an assembly commanded by God?

(8) "My children are sick." A valid reason, but remember your *children's* health will keep *you* away just as much as if *you* were sick. Keep them in good health.

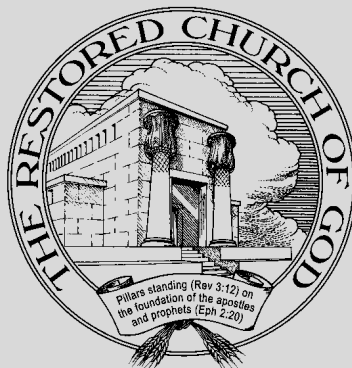
Assemble Together

Brethren, God commands us to have a "holy convocation," where possible, on His Sabbath and Holy Days (Lev. 23:3). There are times when, due to illness, great distances, or other factors, you will be unable to assemble with brethren of like mind. But you must never "forsake the assembling of yourselves together" when it is possible (Heb. 10:25).

Just a few verses later, God gives insight—and powerful instruction—through Paul, regarding how He views those who waver, cease to hold fast and pull back from faithfulness: "'But if any man *draw back*, My soul shall have no pleasure in him.' But we are not of them who draw back unto perdition; but of them that believe to the saving of the soul" (Heb. 10:38-39).

Remember that the people of the true Church of God will always continue steadfastly "in the apostles' *doctrine* AND FELLOWSHIP"! □

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