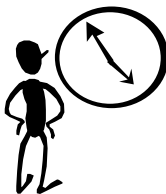


THE BATTLE CREEK BULLETIN

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Time of Assembly

Sunday:

Bible Study	4:00 p.m.
Worship	5:00 p.m.

Wednesday:

Bible Study	7:00 p. m.
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Forsaking the Assembling and the Coronavirus

By Steve A. Hamilton

It is an old debate that has reawakened. Christians feel forced to stay away from the assembly due to the presence of the coronavirus. It is reasoned that members are not forsaking the assembling because they long to be together with the saints, but it is just not safe. The virus has proven to be dangerous to the elderly and especially to those with underlying health conditions. Though brethren have removed themselves from *“the assembling of ourselves together,”* they do not consider it forsaking because it is not a permanent situation and their intent is to return as soon as possible. Therefore, they have not abandoned the Lord.

That same explanation is used by weak brethren as justification to miss services. The Sister in Christ who desires to watch her son’s baseball game that just happened to fall during worship. The family that wishes to watch their child’s graduation ceremony that just happened to fall during a worship service. The farmer who felt that the hay had to be removed from the field during a worship service. None of them in their minds were forsaking because their intent was to return at the next appointed time. They were not abandoning God in their minds.

Likewise, the Apostles had no intention of abandoning the Lord prior to His crucifixion. *“Peter said to Him, “Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You!” And so said all the disciples”* (Matt. 26:35). The only thing that changed to cause Peter to deny the Lord was a fear for his own life. *“Let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth”* (Jas. 1:22-25; 1 Jn. 3:18). Jesus said, *“The spirit indeed is willing [inclusive of intent], but the flesh is weak”* (Matt. 26:41; Mk. 14:38).

The word forsaking does mean abandonment. If we strictly use that definition, we might get the false impression that our brethren did nothing wrong. However, abandonment is not the only meaning for the word forsaking. “The frequent use of this word in classical Greek can be shown in three meanings: (1) “leave behind,” (2) “leave in the lurch, abandon,” (3) “omit” (The Complete Biblical Library #1452). Jesus used this word while He hung on the cross according to some manuscripts. He said, “*My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me*” (Matt. 27:46)? Did God permanently forsake Christ? The Apostle Paul said while imprisoned in Rome, “*At my first defense no one stood with me, but all forsook me*” (2 Tim. 4:16). The implication being by his second defense not all had abandoned him. Paul was well loved by the brethren in Rome (Rom. 16:1-16, 21-24). Therefore, the abandonment was not permanent but temporary.

The difficulty comes when we try to determine if the forsaking in Hebrews 10:25 was meant to be understood as permanent (ref. 2 Cor. 4:9; 2 Tim. 4:10; Heb. 13:5) or temporary (ref. Matt. 27:46; Mk. 15:37; 2 Tim. 4:16). The context would dictate the application. The Hebrew writer says the manner of some of the brethren was to forsake the assembling. If the implication was meant to be understood strictly as permanent, it would not be a manner. A manner is a custom or habit. If it was always a permanent abandonment, why mention the repetition (i.e. the habit) of some who forsake the assembling? Rather, the word forsaking in Hebrews 10:25 is meant to be understood as a temporary leaving behind as in a lurch (See Strong’s definition #1459.). If it were to be understood as a permanent situation, the writer would most logically refer to a departing or an apostacy rather than a forsaking manner. Apostates do not assemble. The Hebrew letter is addressing Christians, not those who do not assemble anyway. The verse says, “*not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together.*” Those who are forsaking are among ourselves. If they departed, they would not be among ourselves. It is implied that the forsaking in question is one that is temporary in nature as in a bad habit.

Alternatively, an argument has been advanced that Hebrews 10:25 is not a command for assembling. A well-versed Brother put forward this reasoning as follows:

“1. Hebrews 10:25 does NOT command that we assemble. The compound verb in this passage is μή ἐγκαταλείπω (#3361, 1459) – not abandon or desert, not leave behind, so that is what we are to do/not do. There is also the dependent (qualifying) phrase, “as is the habit (ἔθος – 1485) of some,” i.e. it has become their way of life. There is a difference between saying, “Go to the store,” and “Don’t quit shopping!” Both may be related to being in a store, but they are not identical, and context must help us understand the situation and the application. The man staying home to watch NASCAR races is guilty of this abandonment, and those who choose to do so after this

pandemic is over MIGHT be as well – but it does not characterize those who have made a temporary arrangement because of this present distress. (I do believe we are to gather together based on other passages and inferring things from this passage, but Hebrews 10:25 does not COMMAND us to assemble. At best, this is lazy exegesis, and at worst, a deliberate corruption in order to “proof text” a practice.)

“2. Language makes a distinction between definition and use, and this is where your analysis of ἐπισυναγωγή (#1997) falls short. Both nouns are feminine, singular, but Heb. 10:25 is in the accusative case, and 2 Thess. 2:1 is in the genitive case. The accusative case, along with ἑαυτοῦ (#1438) makes this noun a reflexive direct object, meaning that it has been their [a] practice to be together (a recognition, not a command).”

Notice in application the man staying home to watch NASCAR is admittedly forsaking by the Brother’s own admission. He may have done it one time. He may have stayed home for the entire season. Nevertheless, it is not a permanent situation, but he has forsaken the assembling. However, our Brother calls it lazy exegesis if we apply it to brethren who stay home due to a virus that they do not have but might get if they assemble with the saints.

Our Brother goes on to say that the word “ourselves” in Hebrews 10:25 is used reflectively meaning it has been their practice to assemble. However, because it was a recognition of what they do it is not a command. Talk about a deliberate effort to corrupt a passage to proof text a position. If I tell my children not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together for dinner and one of them fails to show up at dinner time, do we honestly think there was no command involved? There certainly was a recognition of past practices and if a child fails to come to dinner there will be repercussions. The command to assemble ourselves as used reflectively in recognition of past dinners, in no way negates the direct statement to assemble. Simply put, the case of a word only helps to determine how the word was used in a sentence. The case does not define the word nor does it negate the command.

Admittedly, it seems cold, cruel, or uncaring not to consider our feelings in light of scriptural authority. The Apostle Paul looked at it this way. *“For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I still pleased men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ”* (Gal. 1:10). The truth hurts. Paul knew it. Our faith should not allow us to compromise God’s word by seeking exceptions to God’s laws. Where scriptural authority exists, we are not at liberty to reject it because of a personal feeling that might not ever happen.

Sickness and death are cares of life. Jesus warned us that such cares will choke the Word and make Christians unfruitful (Matt. 13:22). If we let the prospect of an ill-

ness caught at church services prevent our attendance, we will never attend church services again! The Coronavirus is not likely to go away. Do we honestly think God wants us to show mercy for those who do not have the virus and fail to attend church services?

The mercy over sacrifice argument has been promoted as a scriptural consideration. Jesus said on two occasions, *"I desire mercy and not sacrifice"* (Matt. 9:13; 12:7). On the first occasion, Jesus was advocating mercy for sinners over the Pharisee's approach to write them off as a sacrifice by not teaching them. On the second occasion, Jesus was advocating mercy for the disciples who did no wrong over the Pharisee's desire to condemn or sacrifice them as evildoers. There is no parallels here to members forsaking the assembling in these examples. Rather the argument is being used out of context to promote the idea that mercy for disobedience should be allowed over the sacrifice of attending church services. God said through Samuel, *"Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice"* (1 Sam. 15:22). That statement has more application over the present situation than mercy over sacrifice.

Many have been toting the Royal Law as it applies to the coronavirus. God's requirement for church attendance is in no way violating this law. When considering our brethren from a scriptural point of view, God has made provisions for their absence from church services. It seems scripturally inferred that if a person is sick, he is not forsaking (Jas. 5:14). If the person might be infected due to exposure to the virus it seems they would not be forsaking. It seems scripturally inferred that a care giver for the sick would not be forsaking (Jas. 2:15-16). It would also seem scripturally inferred that a person who must work to provide for his own would not be forsaking (1 Tim. 5:8). We need to remember the greatest law that supersedes the Royal Law. *"Jesus answered him, 'The first of all the commandments is: 'Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one. And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' This is the first commandment. And the second, like it, is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these'"* (Mk. 12:29-31). We must ask ourselves if ignoring the first and greatest command to consider our brethren beyond what the Lord has provided in scripture for their absence from services is at all acceptable to God? If a typically healthy non-working person who has no reason to believe he is infected misses services for a non-providential reason, that would be forsaking.

God is a jealous God (2 Cor. 11:2). He has commanded our attendance (Heb. 10:25). He has provided guidelines when to meet (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2), and how to meet (1 Cor. 11). He has given instructions for our obedience that are to be understood as a pattern (1 Tim. 1:13). Why would He allow people to arbitrarily decide when or how to worship when it is spelled out for us in scripture?

