



## The Burning Bush—Online article archive

### Wanted . . . . Absentee Christians!!!



*in connection with threatening the existence of the Sabbath evening gospel meeting. Description of suspects is herein given, the evidence presented and steps to safeguard the gospel meeting proposed.*

**Based upon a sermon preached in Kilskeery Free Presbyterian Church on Lord's Day, 18th November 2001, by the minister, Rev. Ivan Foster**

*Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching, Hebrews 10:25.*

The sum of the believer's duty is to draw near to God, availing ourselves of the wonderful means of access we have into His presence through the blood of Jesus Christ our Saviour. In the chapter in which our text is found, Paul had urged upon the Hebrew Christians the exercising of such a blessed privilege. *Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh; and having an high priest over the house of God; let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water, Hebrews 10:19-22.*

Such "drawing near" is an essential element of our holding fast to our profession. The antithesis of such a duty is that against which Paul warns in this text — forsaking the gathering together with the saints.

My speaking upon this subject has been prompted by a growing concern, shared by many other ministers and members of the Free Presbyterian Church generally, over the beginnings of a forsaking of the local place of worship on a Sabbath evening, in order to sit at home or, in some cases, to travel many miles to an "after church rally." To forsake attendance at our local place of worship on the Lord's Day evening, either to sit at home or to go visiting friends or, indeed, to attend another service in a church some distance from home, is not in keeping with the teaching of God's Word.

Consider what this portion of Holy Scripture teaches on this matter.

#### **I. A VITAL PART OF OUR PUBLIC PROFESSION OF FAITH IN CHRIST IS OUR GATHERING TOGETHER WITH CHRISTIANS IN A LOCAL ASSEMBLY.**

**1. Such a gathering in Christ's name has been ordained by Him.** Here are the Saviour's own words on this matter. How precious they have been to every generation of believers since they were uttered! *For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them, Matthew 18:20.* Note the use of the word *church*, that is *the called out ones*, in verse 17. A Christian is someone who has been called out of fellowship with the world and its sins into fellowship, in accordance with God's Word, with those of like precious faith and with the Saviour Himself, at such times as the people of God collectively deem convenient. Here is what the Westminster Confession of Faith states on the matter of worship. "Neither prayer, nor any other part of religious worship, is now under



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the Gospel either tied unto, or made more acceptable by any place in which it is performed, or towards which it is directed: but God is to be worshipped everywhere, in spirit and truth; as in private families daily, and in secret each one by himself; so, more solemnly, in the public assemblies, which are not carelessly or wilfully to be neglected, or forsaken, when God, by His Word or providence, calleth thereunto," chapter 21, paragraph 6.

**2. The Lord Jesus, during His time of earthly sojourn, was in the habit of such worship.** Consider what we read in Luke 4:16. *And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up: and, as his custom was, he went into the synagogue on the sabbath day.* He would have His disciples likewise habitually gather in worship with fellow believers in the appointed location for worship.

**3. Such a gathering together was certainly the practice of the early church.** The first Lord's Day evening meeting was attended by the Lord on the evening of His resurrection, John 20:19. The converts of the gospel on the day of Pentecost joined with the apostles in such fellowship, Acts 2:42. Consider also Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2.

Does it matter where you go to worship on the Lord's Day? Yes, I do believe it does. If there was revival in one of our churches a few miles away, it would still be your duty to be in attendance here at our local services. Those are not just the words of a minister seeking to safeguard his church attendance. Rather, I believe it to be the teaching of the Word of God.

When the man, delivered from the many devils in Gadara, sought to accompany Christ as He left the area, the Saviour bade Him remain and witness in his area amongst his own people. You could sympathise with the man. Wherever the Saviour went, there was revival. The Gadarene people had no time for the gospel; in fact they had asked Christ to leave. It seemed, humanly speaking, a wise thing for this man to leave with Christ and be amongst God's people and enjoy the blessing of God. But no. He had a higher duty. *Go home to thy friends, and tell them how great things the Lord hath done for thee, and hath had compassion on thee,* Mark 5:19. When we forsake our own local church assembly in order to attend what may well be a much livelier meeting somewhere else, we cease to bear witness to our own neighbours, as Christ commanded us to. On Monday night and every other night, let us all go to that church where there is revival, but on the Lord's Day, our place is in the local assembly of God's people.

### **II. SUCH ASSEMBLING TOGETHER IS A CHIEF MEANS OF PRESERVING THE PEOPLE OF GOD.**

**1. The picture is of a people huddling together for mutual comfort.** The word *exhorting* means *comforting*. It is the verb taken from the Greek word which means *Comforter*, the name of the Holy Ghost, John 14:26. Those who feel themselves not to be of this world will delight in such a gathering. *If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you. If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you,* John 15:18-19. We who have a right relationship with the world — one of animosity — will delight in the company of those of like precious faith.

**2. A sensing of the approaching day of trial makes it even more blessed.** "Do not forsake the assembling of yourselves together," says Paul, "especially as ye see the day



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approaching,” This was a specific reference to the overthrowing of Jerusalem under God’s judgment. AD 70, the year of Jerusalem’s destruction by the Roman army under Titus, was drawing near and there were signs of that dark time coming. We see another such day coming, for you need not be a political expert to see the direction that things are going in here in Ulster. When the leader of the murderous IRA is made the Minister of Education and Protestants seem to be content with such an arrangement, then surely dark times lie ahead for those who love God and His Truth. It is time for Christians to fellowship together and encourage one another in the Lord.

**3. A failure in this duty will dishearten others.** Paul sets *forsaking* over against *exhorting* or comforting. One is the opposite of the other. Mere attendance at God’s house is a service for the people of God. Many little realise just how, by their faithful attendance at the Sabbath services, they encourage their fellow members and the minister and elders. Dear Christian, by your faithful attendance at God’s house you are a comforter of God’s people!

### III. THE FIRST STEP DOWNWARD FOR THE CHRISTIAN IS A DRIFTING FROM GOD’S HOUSE.

The word forsaking refers to an utter abandonment of God’s house and His cause. It is the word used by Christ on the cross. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice . . . My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? Matthew 27:46.

**1. If holding fast is our duty, forsaking God’s house is the beginning of a neglect of that duty.** How few understand that they are letting slip their profession of faith when they do not attend their own services, but rather set out to attend other Christian gatherings. Irrespective of the purpose of such gatherings or the good that is claimed to be done in them, if those who make up the congregation are those who have absented themselves from a service in their home congregation, then such are neglecting an important duty by being there.

**2. This forsaking will lead on to worse.** No good can come of wrong-doing. Sin never stands still. It will seek to drive us further from God. The utter forsaking of God and His Truth begins with *looking back*, Genesis 19:26. It continues with a *drawing back*, Hebrews 10:38. It reaches its dreadful climax with a *turning back*. *From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him*, John 6:66. Beware of drifting from God’s house for whatever reasons!

**3. Such a forsaking ends in hopelessness.** *For if we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins*, Hebrews 10:26. Neglecting God’s house will end in the utter forsaking of Christ if it is not checked and repented of.

### IV. THE CAUSES OF SUCH A DRIFT.

**1. Persecution.** That is what was the difficulty with those Paul was writing to. It is not the cause today. No one in this land suffers persecution or anything like it. There may be domestic and family difficulties for some who are opposed by their relatives in coming to



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God's house, but that is not to be confused with the persecution endured by those Paul was writing to.

**2. The love of this world.** *For Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world, and is departed unto Thessalonica,* 2 Timothy 4:10. Demas did not want to bear the consequences of being a Christian and so forsook Paul. Doubtless Demas would have blamed Paul for the split. He may well have accused Paul of being an "extremist," who would not moderate his beliefs or accommodate the times in which he lived. There is a similar spirit abroad today that would turn the house of God and the worship of God into a fleshly thing more in keeping with the spirit of this age. Some would have us accommodate the spirit of this age by turning from the scriptural worship of God to that which is carnal and pleasing to the flesh. They are for *turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ,* Jude 1:4. They would alter the things and worship of God into the very opposite of what God intended. They would *contradict* or *deny* Christ. When they do not get their way, they forsake the assembly of the saints.

**3. The lack of true saving grace within the heart.** Those who are not content with worshipping God in the manner He has decreed, call in question their experience of God's grace. *Little children, it is the last time: and as ye have heard that antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists; whereby we know that it is the last time. They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us: but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us,* 1 John 2:18-19.

### V. THE MEANS OF COMBATting SUCH A FORSAKING.

**1. We are told to remember.** *But call to remembrance the former days, in which, after ye were illuminated, ye endured a great fight of afflictions,* Hebrews 10:32. *Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent,* Revelation

2:5. Remember the zeal and joy with which you attended God's house when first you knew the Lord. It was with joy you entered God's house and with sorrow you left it.

**2. Call to remembrance former times.** The devil would drive such memories from our minds and have us forget God's mercy. *Can a maid forget her ornaments, or a bride her attire? yet my people have forgotten me days without number,* Jeremiah 2:32. *How long shall this be in the heart of the prophets that prophesy lies? yea, they are prophets of the deceit of their own heart; which think to cause my people to forget my name by their dreams which they tell every man to his neighbour, as their fathers have forgotten my name for Baal,* Jeremiah 23:26-27.

**3. Seek the vision that we once enjoyed.** Verse 32. The illumination of the Holy Spirit changed our outlook entirely. *Heaven above was softer blue, Earth around was sweeter green; Something lived in every hue, Christless eyes had never seen: Birds with gladder songs o'erflowed, Flowers with deeper beauty shone, Since I knew, as then I knew, I was His and He was mine.* We need such a vision again!

**4. Seek the zeal that was once experienced.** Once, amongst us, there was a delighting in the company of God's people, irrespective of the reproach. We gladly stood with God's



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despised servants and counted the reproaches of Christ greater treasure than all this world had to offer.

**5. Seek a fresh consciousness of heaven.** Here is what stayed and supported the Hebrew believers in past trials.

*For ye had compassion of me in my bonds, and took joyfully the spoiling of your goods, knowing in yourselves that ye have in heaven a better and an enduring substance, Hebrews 10:34. Do you have that same sense of heaven's glory and the present enjoyment of its pleasures? If we do, we count it all joy when we fall into trials and tribulations, James 1:2. If we thus recall the former times of God's mercy and blessing, then we will be in that place which is nearest to heaven here on earth — the house of God. We will be found among the saints of God, under the sound of the Word of God, enjoying the comforts of the Spirit of God, in the presence of the Son of God looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God, and wisely making use of the Sabbath Day to build ourselves up in our most holy faith.*

**Copies of this sermon on cassette are available from Kilskeery Free Presbyterian church, £2, including postage.**