

# Four Miles from Church

Daryl Wingerd

How important is faithful church attendance for the Christian? One man who understood its importance was the father of 19<sup>th</sup> century missionary John Paton. Living four miles from their church in Dumfries, Scotland, Paton writes,

... during all these forty years my father was only thrice prevented from attending the worship of God—once by snow so deep that he was baffled and had to return; once by ice on the road, so dangerous that he was forced to crawl back up the Roucan Brae on his hands and knees, after having descended it so far with many falls; and once by the terrible outbreak of cholera at Dumfries.<sup>1</sup>

What would inspire a man like Mr. Paton to attend church so faithfully? More importantly, in a day when so many cultural factors conspire to keep Christians out of church, what would inspire us to be more faithful?

Perhaps the most familiar Bible verse related to church attendance is Hebrews 10:23-25:

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good works, *not forsaking our own assembling together*, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.

Contrary to the way this text is often applied, we do not obey by simply placing our posterior in a pew on Sunday mornings for an hour or so, as though it were a legal requirement, and then by going about our week as if no further obligation existed. We obey by maintaining consistent and meaningful fellowship with our local church family—on Sundays in particular, but also on as many other occasions as possible. You see, Hebrews 10:25 is not about record-keeping or perfect attendance pins. It is about the fellowship that is essential to our survival as Christians.

Hebrews 10:23-25 is found near the conclusion of a lengthy exhortation for Christians to persevere in the faith. This is what “hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering” means in verse 23. The Hebrew Christians were being sorely tried by social pressure and persecution. They were being strongly tempted to give it all up—to walk away from Christ and be ordinary Jews once again. Verses 26-31 follow with a frightening warning about falling away.

Every Christian needs to realize that there is an alternative to persevering as a Christian. That alternative is falling away from the faith, sometimes called “apostasy.” God preserves true believers to the end, but He also sternly and repeatedly warns professing believers to guard themselves against falling away. This is because falling

away from Christ is fatal. God’s elect will be preserved, but those “believers” who eventually abandon their Christian profession, whether for a false religion, a worldly philosophy, or simply due to laziness, apathy, or selfish desires, were never truly among that number, despite former appearances to the contrary. As John said of some apostates in his first letter, “They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us” (1 John 2:19).

What is really at stake in Hebrews 10 is eternity—perseverance in the faith. After the exhortation to persevere given in verse 23, the writer assigns the *means* of perseverance in verses 24-25. This is *how* to survive! And here we learn the purpose and importance of gathering faithfully with the local church.

The author tells them to “stimulate one another” to love and good deeds. Why? So that they can feel warm inside and make an impact on society? Not primarily. Love for other believers and the consistent practice of righteousness are the attitudes and actions that *prove* and *strengthen* a true Christian’s faith (see 1 John 3:9-20). And the fact is, the right kind of stimulation doesn’t occur in isolation. It doesn’t come through worldly associations or pursuits. It only occurs in the context of regular fellowship with other committed Christians.

Some may take what I said earlier about Hebrews 10:25 not being a “legal requirement” as license to be haphazard in church attendance. But if what I said causes anyone to assign *less* importance to the regular meetings of his local church rather than *more*, he has missed the point completely. This passage is about God’s *preservation* of His people, which is accomplished through their *perseverance in the faith*, which requires consistent *fellowship*. Where this is understood, only the most unavoidable hindrances will keep a Christian away.

The professing Christian who says, “Just give me Jesus. I can do without the local church,” does not understand. The New Testament knows nothing about any type of true fellowship with Jesus that is not lived out in fellowship with the other members of His Body, which *is* the church (cf. Eph. 1:22-23). When Paul was persecuting the early church, he was persecuting Jesus (Acts 9:4). Likewise, those who despise the local church despise the visible representation of Christ.

*Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is called “Today,” so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end.”*

Hebrews 3:14

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<sup>1</sup> John Paton, *Missionary Patriarch* (San Antonio, The Vision Forum, Inc., 2002), 15.