



WEST VALLEY CHURCH OF CHRIST

9:30 am Bible Class—all ages
10:30 am Sunday Worship
5:00 pm Proverbs study (online)
7:00 pm Wednesday Bible Class

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Assembling Together:

A Closer Look at What Hebrews 10:25 Tells Us Not to Forsake

The New King James and New American Standard versions of the Bible uphold the language of older translations and have the Bible encouraging us not to forsake “assembling... together” (Hebrews 10:25 NKJV). Even though newer terminology exists (the ESV/NIV have “meet together”/“meeting together”), I think it was a good call by them. I like the term “assembling” better than “meeting,” as it both reflects the picture of the word it translates and paints a clearer picture of what the text expects. The Greek noun rendered “assembling” is *episunagoge*. Its etymology can be traced back to three terms: 1) *epi* – a prefix usually meaning “on”, “upon,” etc. (think “epidermis”); 2) *sun* – another prefix usually meaning with (present in words like “sympathy”); 3) *ago* – a verb for “lead,” “bring,” or “go.” Subtract the prefix *epi*, transliterate it, and you have the English word “synagogue.”

What did synagogue mean to the Hebrew Christians who first received the Hebrews letter? The whole of the word is greater than the sum of its etymological parts. The words “go” and “with” seem to imply an activity, but a synagogue wasn’t just an activity, though it involved regularly scheduled meetings. A synagogue was a place, a building, but it wasn’t just a place to the Jews who met there. It was more than either of those things. A synagogue existed when people of like faith came together and formed a community within the community where they were located. It was a place where people read and studied the Bible and worshipped God, but it was also a place where people met with, talked to, and drew strength from each other. Jews formed synagogues wherever they lived in sufficient numbers; they could not imagine not doing so.

1st Century Hebrew Christians were often not welcome at Jewish synagogues (e.g., Acts 18:4-6). They didn’t have synagogues like the Jews had; they couldn’t legally own buildings until centuries after Christianity began. Yet, the Hebrews author described an *episunagoge* that was *eauton* (“your” or “of yourselves”). The prefix *epi* not only made the word different than the one typically used by the Jews but arguably intensified it. Christians might not have initially had places of assembly, but they were literally assembled one upon another when, “as living stones,” they found themselves “being built up a spiritual house” by Jesus Christ (1 Peter 2:5). Their lives were intertwined more deeply and more intimately than the lives of Jews who met at synagogues. They weren’t merely an assembly; they were a body, in fact, the body of Christ (cf. Ephesians 1:22-23).

Of course, the words of the author of Hebrews could be taken to mean that Christians shouldn’t forsake their Sunday meetings as it reads in the ESV and NIV. However, Sunday meetings were the tip of the iceberg of what Christians had and what they shouldn’t abandon. They had been assembled as a community within a community by none other than Jesus Christ Himself. They needed those worship meetings, but more than that, they needed to meet with, talk to, and draw strength from one another, not just on Sunday but daily (Hebrews 3:13). It was this deep connection that the Hebrews author urged his audience not to forsake.

In today’s world, Sunday worship assemblies can be beamed into our living rooms through the magic of the internet. Please listen though: while technology can allow us an opportunity to worship God at the same time as other believers, it can in no way allow us to assemble together in the way the Hebrews author envisioned. This can only be done by regular, personal contact with fellow believers. Any time we find ourselves separated from other Christians, we should feel as though something precious and important is missing. If at any time we find ourselves satisfied with an assembly we watch remotely, there’s a fair chance we have already begun to be “hardened through the deceitfulness of sin” (Hebrews 3:13). The remedy given there is “exhort one another,” which is exactly what happens when we assemble together (Hebrews 10:25).