

Faithful Fathers and the Church Meeting

by John Thompson, November 18, 2002

Last Sunday, our family enjoyed a delicious and nutritious meal together. No, it wasn't breakfast, lunch, or supper. And it wasn't even my natural family. I am referring instead to the meeting of the church where our gracious head and host, the Lord Jesus Christ, served a spiritually tasty and balanced diet. Both He (through His Spirit) and His ministers (all believers) had given much time and effort to prepare this delectable banquet with each family member in mind. Only one thing was lacking. Some of His children were absent from the dinner table. For one reason or another — some valid, others baseless — they missed this savory feast. Did they realize how much this might disparage their Savior, discourage their brethren, and damage their own family?

We fathers have been assigned by God the responsibility of setting our family's daily agenda according to God's priorities, not our own pleasures (1 Cor. 11:3) — priorities which give Him the preeminence and place others' interests above our own (Matt. 6:33; 22:36-39). This duty certainly does not disappear on Sunday morning. In fact, for most of us it looms even larger since God has accorded special significance to our activities and relationships on the Lord's Day. So, the choices we make each Sunday morning are vital, pivotal, and even determinative for our family's guidance, the assembly's growth, and our Savior's glory.

Our problem with faithfulness in the church meeting is surely not new, else God wouldn't have exhorted the New Testament believers not to forsake their own assembling together (Heb. 10:25). But it is also not the biblical norm. What exactly was the New Testament pattern for church gathering, and how does our own Sunday meeting compare? What activities did the saints gather for, and who participated?

The New Testament Pattern

When we examine each reference to the church gatherings in the book of Acts and the Epistles (e.g., Acts 6:5; 11:26; 15:22,30; 20:8; Rom. 16:23; 1 Cor. 14:23; etc.), it becomes evident that there was one regular meeting of the church each week which took place on Sunday and consisted of four regular spiritual components — the apostles' doctrine, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer (Acts 2:42). These four regular, corporate activities (grounded necessarily in private and family worship) constituted the complete weekly diet necessary for the growth of all believers. Other spiritual components of the corporate gathering, like baptism and church discipline, were irregular, not weekly.

Just as our physical health is dependent upon our eating regularly from each of the essential food groups, so also our spiritual health is contingent upon our feeding regularly upon the four basic spiritual food groups of the church meeting: doctrine, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer. Though there were occasional mid-week gatherings for special purposes (like to pray Peter out of jail or to receive Paul's missionary report), the New Testament church did NOT divide the regular spiritual components into several meetings each week (Sunday morning, Sunday evening, Wednesday evening), tempting Christians to partake of some food groups but not others and resulting in an unbalanced spiritual diet.

This New Testament model is consistent with God's pattern for His Old Testament saints, too. Whenever they gathered for spiritual purposes, the whole group normally gathered for the whole meeting. (Note especially Exod. 19:8; Deut. 31:11-13; Josh. 8:35; 2 Chron. 34:30; Neh. 8:1-3; and Joel 2:15-16.)

At our own local church we have structured our gathering according to the biblical pattern (as we best understand it) in order to provide a complete spiritual diet for the health of all the saints. We have one regular meeting of the church each week. In Scripture it is consistently called the gathering together, the coming together, the assembly, or the meeting. But NEVER in Scripture is it called a service. That is what we DO in the meeting — spiritual service to Christ and His saints.

Yet, in spite of our best efforts to be biblical, there is sometimes an inconsistency among our families regarding their presence, preparation, and participation in the meeting of the church, evidenced in four ways:

1. Incomplete attendance — the whole family frequently absent.
2. Incomplete family — only part of the family attending the meeting.
3. Incomplete meeting — attending for only part of the meeting.
4. Incomplete participation — even when the family is present (which is certainly commendable), there is often no preparation and participation by some of the fathers and older sons.

A father's motive is certainly a key ingredient in this matter of faithfulness in assembling together. For example, a believer may consistently come to the Sunday meeting, yet be consistent out of a wrong motive (i.e., to look spiritual rather than to please Christ). Or, a Christian may be inconsistent in attending or participating in the Sunday gathering, yet have a genuine desire to please Christ. The consistency problem may be spiritual weakness rather than spiritual willfulness. Our highest purpose in this matter of church meeting (as in all else) should be to bring glory (renown, honor) to God out of a motive of love for Him: Whatever you do, do ALL for the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:13). Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven (Matt. 5:16). We are exhorted by Scripture not to judge one another's motives (1 Cor. 4:5), but we are exhorted to observe, evaluate, and help one another's behavior (e.g., 1 Cor. 5:12). So, let's evaluate the problem and then help one another to improve.

Faithfulness Pleases Christ

Why should we fathers be faithful to prepare for, to attend, and to participate in the church meeting? Isn't it spiritually sufficient to be steadfast in our personal and family devotions? Is the church gathering really that crucial when there are so many activities, opportunities, and necessities that beg our time on Sundays?

If we are serious about pleasing Christ above all others, then it should be significant to us that Christ desires each of His blood-bought children to gather unto Him each Lord's Day, prepared to participate in the meeting which He heads. This is His commandment (1 Cor. 14:37, cf. ch.11-14), so obviously this is what pleases Him. Shouldn't we obey His commandments out of love? "He who has my commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me..." (John 14:21). But why specifically does the meeting of the church please Christ?

Our presence and participation in the church gathering please Christ because they show HONOR to Him. "If because of the sabbath you turn your foot from doing your own pleasure on My holy day, and call the sabbath a delight, the holy day of the Lord honorable, and honor it, desisting from your own ways, from seeking your own pleasure ... then you will take delight in the Lord..." (Isa. 58:13-14). "He who offers a sacrifice of thanksgiving honors Me. . ." (Ps. 50:23). Fathers, do we show honor to men by attending and participating in their gatherings (birthdays, weddings, funerals, business meetings)? Of course we do! Doesn't our precious Savior deserve even more honor than what we show men? Certainly He does!

Our Lord actually seeks the worship of those who will worship Him in spirit and in truth (John 4:23). Worshiping Christ in truth means worshiping Him as He has prescribed in Scripture, each believer gathering each Sunday for each element of worship — the apostles' doctrine, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer (Acts 2:42). Christ particularly desires our corporate remembrance of Him in the breaking of bread. In fact, He has made this the primary purpose of our gathering together with Him (Acts. 20:7 — we were gathered together to break bread). Christ also enjoys our mutual prayer. He delights to hear our corporate praises and petitions as our hearts amen one another (1 Cor. 14:16).

Faithfulness Edifies Saints

In addition to pleasing Christ, our faithfulness as fathers is vital to our fellow saints. The other Christians in our local church family need our fellowship (Acts 2:42). Fellowship, which is our sharing of spiritual and material blessings, is one way that we stimulate one another unto love and good deeds (Heb. 10:24). According to Acts 2:42, God concluded that doing this in the Sunday gathering is essential to the spiritual health of the body.

The other saints in our meeting are also edified by our participation. “When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching.... Let all things be done for edification” (1 Cor. 14:26). Clearly, the church’s building up in Christ is the responsibility of each one, not just the elders. By God’s design, our presence and participation is an essential cog in the assembly gear. Do you know how poorly a machine works when a gear tooth is missing? Shouldn’t we all be firmly attached gear teeth, keeping the assembly running smoothly?

Finally, our brothers and sisters in Christ need our presence. When we are faithfully present, the other saints can, without undue burden, fulfill their one another responsibilities to us, such as love, edify, pray for, admonish, welcome, greet, care for, serve, forbear, be kind, teach, comfort, encourage, stimulate, show hospitality, fellowship? And we, likewise, to them.

More specifically, the teaching brother has come to minister to us (as have all those who prepare worship or teaching). He has worked hard all week to prepare with each family in mind. When a family is absent without justification, not only do they miss the blessing of his teaching, but also he is disappointed (perhaps even discouraged) that his hard work has not benefited your family. If all the assembly followed your example, would all his effort be for nothing? Do you enjoy preparing hard for teaching or worship, only to have a portion of the saints consider some other activity more important to them? Is not this a matter of honoring one another? Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor (Rom. 12:10).

Furthermore, the elders want to shepherd each of us through the edification that occurs, by God’s design, in the weekly gathering. In many assemblies, the Sunday teaching is sequential, requiring an understanding of each week’s teaching in order to grasp the whole doctrine or book study. How can the elders fulfill their shepherding responsibility if we are not present to receive it? Can you imagine how much extra work it puts on the elders when they must shepherd sheep who are wandering out in the world on Sundays? “... They keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you” (Heb. 13:17).

Lastly, even the angels look down upon the conduct of believers in the church to observe the wisdom of God (Eph. 3:10; 1 Cor. 11:10). When we are present and participating in the meeting, God’s object lesson to the angels is complete and unblemished.

Faithfulness Shows Obedience

Beyond pleasing Christ and edifying others, our consistency as fathers in the church meeting is crucial for our family. Since the father sets the example for his family, let’s think first why it’s important for you personally, Dad, to be faithful in the meeting. Most obviously, of course, you need to be obedient to Jesus Christ. Obedience is how we grow in grace, enjoy God’s blessings, avoid God’s discipline, and show our love to Jesus Christ. This obedience includes following Heb. 10:24-25: “Let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, 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” (NASB).

Do we see all that is included in this passage? Here is an exhortation to every believer from God, the Author of Scripture (“Let us”). Its context is the meeting of the local church (“assembling together”). One purpose for this gathering is to fulfill our one another responsibilities to those in the local body (“stimulate one another ... encouraging one another”). The means, very obviously, is our faithful presence and participation in the local meeting (“not forsaking our own assembling”). The clear implication of the contrast (“but”) is that, if we are

forsaking the meeting, we will not be encouraging one another. The urgency of this meeting (“all the more”) is the soon coming of Christ (v. 37) and the preceding wickedness for which we will need mutual encouragement to endure (1 Pet. 4:7ff).

Based on the New Testament pattern described above, obedience in not forsaking our own assembling together normally includes bringing our whole family for the whole meeting. God Himself regulates how He will be acceptably worshiped. Historically, this has been called the regulative principle of worship and has been firmly followed by most Bible-believing Christians since the Reformation. Referring to worship, God warned: “Whatever I command you, you shall be careful to do; you shall not add to nor take away from it” (Deut. 12:32). Jesus condemned the Pharisees for placing personal convenience ahead of God’s worship regulations: “Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men” (Mark 7:1-13). Paul confirmed that his teaching and practice of church worship was the Lord’s commandment (1 Cor. 14:37; 4:17). Thus, when without biblical justification we are negligent by (1) being absent, (2) only part of the family attending, (3) staying for only part of the meeting, or (4) coming unprepared to participate — then we have violated God’s command to worship Him acceptably.

Obedience also includes keeping the Lord’s Day holy (i.e., set apart for a special purpose). Whether you believe in the Christian Sabbath View of Sunday or the Lord’s Day View of Sunday, in both views the Sunday gathering of the church is a priority over everything else except works of piety, necessity, or mercy (explained later).

Those who embrace the Christian Sabbath View (typically Reformed believers) teach that on Sunday Christians are to rest from their ordinary leisure and labor (except works of piety, necessity, or mercy) and devote the entire day to worshipping and serving Christ both corporately and privately. Those who hold to the Lord’s Day View (usually Dispensational believers) advise that Sunday is the Lord’s day during which at least the regular meeting of the church (some say the whole day) should be made a priority over everything else except works of piety, necessity, or mercy.

Our own family has concluded that on Saturday, Christians should make whatever preparations are necessary to honor God on Sunday. Then, on Sunday, we are to rest (cease) from our ordinary leisure (recreation) and labor (work) in order to make worshipping and serving Christ both corporately and privately a priority over everything except works of piety, necessity, and mercy. Sunday is God’s dike against the raging waves of the flesh — which wants to please itself every day. It is not MY day but the LORD’S day. This very special day is to be administered under grace, not law.

Finally, if we forsake the assembling together, how can we possibly fulfill the New Testament meeting commands? If we are not consistently present in the Sunday gathering, how can we be obedient in our collective worship (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 11:20), our common fellowship (1 Thess. 5:26; 1 Cor. 16:1-2), our joint edification (1 Cor. 14:26; Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16), and our mutual prayer (1 Tim. 2:8)?

Faithfulness Shows Honor and Selflessness

In addition to showing obedience, faithfulness shows honor to Jesus Christ through our presence at His meeting and our service to Him on His day. Honor (literally, to value) is an inner attitude of deep appreciation for someone accompanied by outward actions of valuing them. God’s principle is honor given results in honor received: “Those who honor Me I will honor” (1 Sam. 2:30). Fathers, if we honor God with our time, talent, and treasure, He will honor us with blessing from heaven and respect from men (especially from our fellow saints, our wife, and our children). We need to honor Christ higher than we honor men (employer, relative, wife, children, etc.) because He is of greater value and has done more for us than anyone on this earth! God cursed Eli’s house forever because “[you] honor your sons above Me” (1 Sam. 2:29ff). Jesus warns us, “He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not

worthy of Me” (Matt. 10:37). Who most deserves our presence on the Lord’s Day? Is it not our Lord Jesus Christ above all others? Showing honor to Christ by your presence at His meeting, will result in a sterling testimony to your family, neighbors, and friends that Jesus Christ is worthy of your highest commitment.

We also show honor to our fellow believers in the assembly by being faithful in the church meeting. It helps us to grow in personal humility when we give preference to one another in honor (Rom. 12:10) by gathering with, and ministering to, our fellow saints. It also helps us to be rightly committed to our local assembly because “Where your treasure is [time, talent, energy, money], there your heart will be also” (Matt. 6:21). But if our treasure is invested elsewhere on Sunday, our heart will soon follow!

Beyond showing honor, faithfulness in the church meeting demonstrates a father’s selfless leadership to the assembly and to his family. Selfless leadership is the defining element of biblical manhood. For that reason, Paul commands us to grow up in this area, to “Act like men...” (1 Cor. 16:13). Such leadership in the assembly is the responsibility of every man, not just the elders and deacons, for it is simply one application of the priesthood of every believer (1 Pet. 2:5). Such leadership in the family is the training ground for higher levels of spiritual leadership in the assembly (1 Tim. 3:5). In brief, then, when a father is faithful in the church meeting, he is showing biblical manhood both in his assembly and in his home.

Finally, in order to resist the temptations of the world, the passions of the flesh, and the wiles of the devil, we need the spiritually balanced meal — worship, fellowship, prayer, and teaching — served by Christ to His lambs each and every week (Acts 2:42). If that were not so, then He would not have created such a meeting. But He did! So we all need it, and we need it all.

Faithfulness Crucial for Family

In addition to benefiting you personally, Dad, your example and leadership in the church meeting is crucial for your wife and children, too. Since your family members also are responsible before God for their faithfulness, don’t you want them to obey and honor Christ by being present at His meeting? Do you desire such a virtuous wife whose value is far above jewels (Prov. 31)? If you encourage her to be obedient and honoring to Christ, then, by God’s design, she will be obedient and honoring to you. Do you desire faithful children who will honor you in their adult years? Then train them to honor God first! By your own example, what attitudes are you building into your children toward obedience to Christ, honor to the brethren, and discipline of self?

Since your wife and children must submit to your decisions for the family, do you want them submitting to godly or ungodly decisions about the use of the Lord’s Day? Since your wife and children need the spiritually balanced meal which Christ provides through His meeting, isn’t it right to consistently bring them? According to Scripture, there is no better place to dine this side of heaven! Even if you cared nothing for your own spiritual welfare, wouldn’t it be proper to meet your family’s spiritual needs by faithfully bringing them to the church meeting? Most Christian men would answer all the above questions with an impassioned yes. So, what hinders us?

What Hinders Us?

Spiritual faithfulness or failure always occurs at one of three levels. If we are inconsistent in our presence, our preparation, or our participation in the church meeting, then we may have either a head problem, a heart problem, or a habit problem. Fathers, is your spiritual elevator stuck at one of these levels? Be honest with yourself as we examine this issue together.

First, we may have a head or knowledge problem, that is, a lack of understanding about what God desires of us. Since God’s will is revealed through His Word (Rom. 2:18), our knowledge problem is remedied by studying what God’s Word says about our presence and participation in the church meeting. This is what we have just

explained. Do you now understand how serious the meeting is to Christ? Do you comprehend how vital your participation is to your fellow saints? Do you realize how crucial the gathering is to you and your family? The priority of the meeting should be very clear to us now. Only two knowledge questions remain, and these will be explored momentarily: (1) What absences are justifiable? And (2) How do we handle conflicting priorities (like honoring God vs. honoring unsaved relatives who visit our home on Sunday)?

Second, we may have a heart or motive problem, that is, a lack of love for Jesus Christ, at least insufficient to overcome our love for ourselves. A heart problem is not so much a problem of information as it is a problem of inspiration, not so much a question of knowing God's will as desiring God's will (James 4:3). What is its cause, its characteristics, and its cure?

The tap root, or cause, which bears sinful fruit in our thoughts, attitudes, emotions, words, and deeds is in Scripture called the self or old nature. This idolatry of self (cf. Ezek. 14:1-5) is inherited from Adam by every person and battles for supremacy against the new nature of the believer. That main root is actually two-pronged according to Ephesians 2:3, expressing itself through the desires of the flesh or self-pleasure (a worship of the outer man through sensuality, overeating, materialism, etc.) and through the desires of the mind or self-exaltation (a worship of the inner man through desires for control, influence, approval, status, conflict avoidance, self-righteousness, self-pity, independence, achievement, competitiveness, comparing, etc.) Our root problem is NOT our circumstances, but rather our character — NOT the heat, but our heart.

This root problem of idolatry of self (instead of worship of Christ) surfaces every Sunday morning in the following possible ways. (Think how differently we would handle these problems on a Monday morning when we must go to work, start school, catch a plane, meet a client, etc.) In the form of self-pleasure, that is, what makes the outer man (the body) feel good, here are a few characteristic excuses of Christians who are unfaithful due to a heart problem:

1. I worked too hard yesterday — need to sleep in today.
2. I've got a little sniffle coming on (I think, maybe).
3. I just couldn't find the time to prepare worship or teaching.
4. I need to travel on Sunday so I don't give up a vacation day. (You may sacrifice your days, but NOT God's day!)
5. Since I went fishing on Saturday, I've got to mow the lawn on Sunday morning.
6. I love to hunt, and it's hunting season.
7. I love sports, and there's a great game on TV.
8. I'm on vacation (from God?).
9. I'm involved in an activity that meets on Sunday. (Are we letting pagan culture squeeze us into its mold?)

In the form of self-exaltation, that is, what makes the inner man (the mind) feel good, here are a few more characteristic excuses of Christians who are unfaithful due to a heart problem:

1. I want to celebrate my child's birthday by doing something special on Sunday. (Idolatry of approval/honor of man over approval/honor of God.)
2. I don't want to inconvenience my visiting relatives or make them feel uncomfortable. (Idolatry of approval/honor of man over God.)
3. I must work on Sunday morning to get everything accomplished that I planned. (Idolatry of achievement.) See Haggai 1:9-11 — God will make all your work result in nothing if you neglect His house!
4. I'm having company for lunch, so I can't stay for the whole meeting. (Idolatry of approval/honor of man over God.)
5. I'm upset with someone in the church and don't want to see them. (Idolatry of peace/avoidance of conflict.)

6. I like my job, even though it interferes with Sunday. (Idolatry of work.)
7. I don't get much out of the meeting — boring, no friends, etc. (Idolatry of self-righteousness, focus on getting rather than giving in the meeting.)

So, dads, what is the cure? How do we let God circumcise our fleshly hearts? The only cure for the idolatry (or worship) of self is a true heart-worship of Jesus Christ, a desire (yearning, longing, craving) to please Him above all others and at all cost because He alone is worthy.

Let the Scriptures speak for themselves on this point: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and foremost commandment” (Matt. 22:37-38). “We also have as our ambition ... to be pleasing to Him” (2 Cor. 5:9). (What else are we ambitious about on Sunday?) “Filled with the knowledge of His will ... so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects. . .” (Col. 1:9-10). “But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you” (Matt. 6:33). “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive ... honor and glory and blessing” (Rev. 5:12).

Practically speaking, fathers, how may we put on this truth? First, recognize that all idolatry (putting anything ahead of God) has its origin in a lack of love for God, at least insufficient to overcome love for self. “If you love me, you will keep My commandments” (John 14:15). Second, believe what God says in His Word about the importance of the church meeting, even when it conflicts with pressures from culture, family, etc. Third, in your private and family devotions, dwell upon His magnificent character and merciful love to you since thankfulness to Christ motivates our obedience. Is one meeting each week so much to give Him in return? Blessing and joy will follow our love-motivated obedience: “But one who looks intently at the perfect law ... and abides by it ... this man will be blessed in what he does” (James 1:25; cf. Gen. 4:7). Fourth, obey Christ by making the church meeting a priority whether you feel like it or not, because Christ obeyed (went to the cross for you) even when He did not feel like it. Fifth, when you fail, don't make excuses to defend your pride. God does not expect perfection, just repentance. Finally, maintain hope by believing that whatever God commands, God empowers us to do. “By the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body...” (Rom. 8:13).

A “Habit” Problem

If we find that we understand well the significance of the church meeting, then we do not have a head or knowledge problem. And if we sincerely desire to please Christ by our presence, preparation, and participation in the assembly, then ours is not a heart or motive problem. Our inconsistency, instead, may be a habit or flesh problem, that is, a lack of spiritual persistence and self-discipline to overcome the obstacles which Satan puts in our path on Sunday mornings. Even when we know God's will and yearn to do it, we still have a body which is habituated to please self rather than to obey Christ.

Again, let's let the Scriptures speak to us. Consider yourselves to be dead (to the authority of) sin. “[Stop] presenting the members of your body to sin ... but present yourselves to God... [And] you [will] derive your benefit ... sanctification.” (Rom. 6:10,13,22; cf. 1 Pet. 4:1-2). When Christ was crucified, He died not only for sin, that is, for its penalty (resulting in our justification); but He also died to sin, that is, to its power and authority (resulting in our sanctification). When we became united with Christ by faith, we were spiritually identified with His death, burial, and resurrection and died to sin — i.e., died to its authority. Sin is no longer our authority that we should obey its lusts. Jesus is our new King. Nevertheless, Satan continues to tempt us as if he still has a right to our allegiance. Thus, we must be careful to behave as faithful citizens of our new King, always presenting our members to Him as instruments of righteousness (v. 13). Our wonderful benefit will be a lifestyle free from the vicious circle of sin and destruction.

Practically speaking, fathers, “... in reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside [put off] the old self ... and put on the new self which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the

truth” (Eph. 4:22-24) This means that whenever you face a temptation from the old self to make a sinful choice, put off that sinful thought, emotion, word, or deed and put on the righteous thought, emotion, word, or deed that, according to God’s Word, should replace it.

Here are a few applications to our topic to get us started (the first statements are what to put off — the second are what to put on):

- Staying up Saturday night. — Sufficient rest for worship.
- No time for study. — Disciplined study to teach others.
- Much to do Sunday morning. — Make preparations on Saturday.
- Rising too late on Sunday. — Rise early to honor Christ.
- Leaving house late. — Back everything up 15 minutes.
- Husband makes us late. — Ask wife for accountability.
- Wife makes us late. — Ask husband for accountability.
- Children make us late. — Train in self-discipline and honor.

What Absences Are Justifiable?

The Scriptures teach only three categories of exception from the church meeting. That is, there are but three kinds of activities for which we may honorably be late to or absent from our local gathering. Historically, these have been called deeds of piety, necessity, and mercy.

Deeds of piety are endeavors of spiritual work, such as being away to teach God’s Word at another assembly or counseling a desperate (suicidal) person who may have called you on Sunday morning. This exception is grounded in Christ’s own approval that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple break the Sabbath, and are innocent (Matt. 12:5), a reference to the spiritual work (such as preparing the showbread or sacrifices) required of the Old Testament priests by the Mosaic Law (e.g., Lev. 24:8; Num. 28:9-10).

Deeds of necessity are activities required of us by our circumstances, such as protecting our nation through military, police, or fire service, absence due to serious illness, or being detained by failing transportation or unsafe weather. The principle undergirding this exemption is our Lord’s own statement that the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath (Mark 2:27).

Finally, deeds of mercy refer to the necessary care of either people or animals to relieve their suffering. For example, Jesus Himself healed on the Sabbath to the great consternation of the Pharisees (John 5:1-18); He likewise condoned rescuing an animal that falls into a pit on the Sabbath (Matt. 12:11). These last two exceptions are particularly vulnerable to abuse; but God knows each man’s motive for being absent, and we must examine our own hearts.

How do we handle supposed conflicting priorities, like honoring God vs. honoring unsaved relatives who visit our home on Sunday? Each category of exception (piety, necessity, mercy) is actually an application of the higher law principle of Scripture. That is, God’s laws of piety, necessity, and mercy take priority over His law governing the Lord’s Day. However, any conflicting priorities that do not fall into one of these three categories are really conflicts in our own head, heart, or habits. They may, in fact, reveal a love of self (manifested in wanting man’s approval, avoiding conflict, desiring influence, self-pleasure, etc.) more than a love of Christ. In reality, we can generally honor both God and man if we are honest with relatives and plan well.

- What are some examples of absences or lateness to the meeting that are NOT justifiable? Here are a few that we have seen in our own assembly:
- Making a meal (preparing for hospitality). Instead prepare on Saturday (Ex. 16:22-30).
- Work (other than true necessity — see above). Instead plan better and trust God (Ex. 34:21).

- Recreation, including traveling on vacation. We are NEVER on vacation from God! You can sacrifice your days, but not God's! Always plan your travel so that you and your family can worship in some assembly each Lord's Day.
- Remaining home with a sick family member who could be left alone.
- Family celebrations, such as birthdays or anniversaries. Who deserves your highest honor?
- Relatives or friends visiting your home. Let them know, in advance of their coming, how your family honors Christ on His day.
- Disinterest in the church meeting. Evaluate your own spiritual life. Is your focus on self? Let elders know your suggestions for improving the meeting.

How Can We Help One Another?

Helping a failing brother is the responsibility of every Spirit-controlled believer in the assembly. This is, in fact, how we bear one another's burdens (cf. Gal. 6:1-5). Make sure, of course, that you have first taken the log out of your own eye in this matter (Matt. 7:1-5). As we mentioned at the beginning of this article, we are responsible to evaluate each other's behavior in the light of Scripture for the purpose of aiding, not with the intent of unmerciful judging. So, go with the right attitudes of gentleness (not self-assertiveness), and humility (not self-righteousness). Then, offer practical help to the failing brother. If he is overworked, help him on Saturday so he won't be tempted to stay home on Sunday. If only one parent comes to meeting with the children, offer one of your older children to help that family during meeting. Give positive suggestions to help failing saints resist the pressure of culture, family members, and general self-centeredness.

But help is not just one-sided. If you are an inconsistent father, you must realize how greatly your attitude and behavior affect your family (especially your children) and your fellow saints. When others are looking up to you, don't let them down! Recall that the church meeting is really a family meal. Since there is one bread, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one bread (1 Cor. 10:16-17). The head of our church family, Jesus Christ, serves each of His children a spiritually balanced diet each Lord's Day. He and His ministers (all believers) labor long and hard to prepare this delicious meal with you in mind. Whenever you are either absent or late for the family meal, your action affects all the other family members. The issue is NOT just between you and God — it is a family matter. In a natural family you at least would owe the courtesy of an explanation to the other family members. If your absence or lateness was a sinful choice, you would also confess that sin and ask forgiveness from the family. Might such a practice in the assembly set a positive example of love and humility if fathers adopted this practice on their own? Perhaps we have not yet come to appreciate enough the family members God has given us in the local church body. May God give us hearts that are devoted our church family!