

## Why Did God Give Us “Sunday Church”?

### Introduction

This morning I want to ask two questions. First, *why* is *this* important? **Why** do we “go to Church?” Why do we gather together on Sunday? Can we really give a compelling answer to this question? Why is this important? The second question is very easily answered once we’ve answered the first. *How* important is this? *How* important are these gatherings on Sunday morning? *How* important is it that we “go to church?”

You might ask *why* I’m preaching this message – especially since Sunday morning attendance isn’t really an area where we struggle as a church membership. Last week we were exhorted with respect to corporate prayer as an area where we need to strive more diligently for 100% *desire*. We were reminded that the point is not 100% attendance 100% of the time, but rather 100% *desire* 100% of the time. And that tells us right away that we could easily have 100% attendance 100% of the time and still lack 100% *desire* 100% of the time! We may be here every single Sunday, but *why* are we here? And depending on *why* we’re here, how does this impact the depth of our *desire* to be here? We need to be *conscious* every Sunday of the Scriptural reason for “going to church.” And then we need to embrace this Scriptural reason **by faith** – believing that *this* really is what God’s Word says it is. Only then will we have 100% *desire* 100% of the time. 100% attendance is not the point, and it’s not enough.

### I. A God of Covenants

The Bible tells us that God is a God who makes covenants. We see this over and over and over again throughout the Scriptures from beginning to end. “Covenant” is a huge deal in the Bible.

God’s covenants are the way that He enters into *relationship* with human beings. God comes to us and initiates relationship with us *in His covenants*. That’s why we can talk about “*Covenant Relationship*” – because there really is no other kind. There is no such thing as a relationship with God apart from His covenant. Not only can we speak about “covenant relationship,” but also about “*Covenant Community*.” When God enters into Covenant Relationship with people, all those people are then bound together as one because they’re all taking part in one and the same covenant. And so together, they are truly the “Covenant Community.”

Remember, these aren’t just fancy words for fancy ideas. Throughout the Scriptures, “covenant” is at the very heart of *all* God’s dealings with us. It’s through “covenant” that God saves us, and enters into personal relationship with us.

The Bible is built around five covenants that God has made, all of them very closely connected with each other. But we can also just think of two covenants – the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. It’s these two covenants that give us the names for the two parts of our Bible – Old Testament and New Testament. In God’s covenants He does two things. He **promises to us** all the blessings of His salvation, and He **requires from us** faithful obedience to His Law.

## II. The Old Covenant

The first covenant was made with the nation of Israel when they came out of Egypt and were camped at Mount Sinai.

- ✓ Exodus 19:4-6 — You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

God promised Israel all the blessings of His salvation if they would obey His voice and keep His covenant.

- ✓ Exodus 24:7-8 — [Moses] took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people. And they said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient." And Moses took the blood and threw it on the people and said, "Behold the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words."

The Lord entered into a relationship with the people of Israel by the means of a covenant – a covenant sealed with blood. And so now the nation of Israel is the "*Covenant Community*." They are the ones with whom God has entered into "*Covenant Relationship*."

In connection with this first covenant there were "Covenant Curses" and "Covenant Blessings."

- ✓ Leviticus 26:3, 9, 11-15, 24-25 — If you walk in my statutes and observe my commandments and do them... I will turn to you and make you fruitful and multiply you and will **confirm my covenant with you**... I will make my dwelling among you, and my soul shall not abhor you. And I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people... But if you will not listen to me and will not do all these commandments, if you spurn my statutes, and if your soul abhors my rules, so that you will not do all my commandments, *but break my covenant*... then I also will walk contrary to you... and I will bring a sword upon you, that shall **execute vengeance for the covenant**.

Can you see how important this whole idea of the covenant really is? The Bible is impossible to fully understand without understanding "covenant." Apart from God's gracious covenant, there is no salvation. Covenant is everything. And so it was only natural that there should be regular and special times when the Covenant Community came together for Covenant **Renewal**. Just before the people of Israel crossed over the Jordan to enter the land of Canaan, they observed a special time of Covenant Renewal.

- ✓ Deuteronomy 29:10-13 — You are standing today all of you before the LORD your God... so that you may enter into the sworn covenant of the LORD your God, which the LORD your God is making with you today, that he may establish you today as his people, and that he may be your God, as he promised you, and as he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

There was another special time of Covenant Renewal after the initial conquests in the land of Canaan when the people stood in front of Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerazim and listened to the reading of the Law and recited the blessings and the curses (Joshua 8:30-35). Sometimes a king would gather the people together for Covenant Renewal after periods of great rebellion and wickedness and idolatry (cf. Joash, 2 Kings 11; Josiah, 2 Kings 23). But in addition to these special and unique times of Covenant Renewal, God gave to His people regularly planned times of Covenant Renewal. And always this “Covenant Renewal” of the “Covenant Relationship” happened in the context of the *gathered* “Covenant Community.” So first there was the weekly Sabbath, which was a sign of God’s covenant.

- ✓ Exodus 31:16 (cf. Isaiah 56:6) — Therefore the people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a covenant [sign] forever.
- ✓ Leviticus 23:3 — Six days shall work be done, but on the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, a *holy convocation*.

In addition to the weekly Sabbaths, there were also yearly Sabbaths that were connected with Israel’s annual Festivals. At all of these annual Festival Sabbaths the *covenant community gathered together* for *covenant renewal* of its *covenant relationship* with the Lord (cf. Exodus 13:3-10).

- ✓ Leviticus 23:1-2 — The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, These are the appointed feasts of the LORD that you shall proclaim as *holy convocations*.”

So Israel’s life as God’s Covenant Community was built *around*, and centered *around*, and revolved *around* these constant, regular, repeated times of Covenant Renewal. And since God’s covenant was made not with isolated individuals but with an entire nation, therefore, Covenant Renewal *always* took place in the context of the *gathered* Covenant Community (what Leviticus calls “holy convocations”). The covenant was *everything*, and that’s *why* regular times of Covenant Renewal were so desperately important, *and* so wonderfully joyful.

So the first covenant was made with the ethnic nation of Israel after God brought them out of slavery in the land of Egypt. There were a few people who kept the covenant because of God’s saving grace. But for the most part, the *nation* of Israel was always breaking the covenant and experiencing the Covenant Curses.

- ✓ 2 Kings 17:15; 18:12 — They despised his statutes and his covenant that he made with their fathers and the warnings that he gave them... They did not obey the voice of the LORD their God but transgressed his covenant, even all that Moses the servant of the LORD commanded. They neither listened nor obeyed.

The problem wasn’t the covenant God made, but the people it was made with (Rom. 7). Their *hearts* were sinful. How was God going to save His people if the people kept breaking His covenant? God promised a New Covenant.

### III. The New Covenant

- ✓ Jeremiah 31:31–34 — Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.

The Old Covenant made requirements, but it didn't give the desire or the ability to obey those requirements. The New Covenant would be different. In the New Covenant, God Himself would provide a new birth, a new creation, new hearts that would gladly and willingly desire to obey God's laws and *keep His covenant*. The Old Covenant was inaugurated and sealed with the blood of calves and goats (Heb. 9:18-20). The New Covenant was inaugurated and sealed with the shed blood of Jesus. The Old Covenant was made with the Jewish nation of Israel – which was composed of both believers and unbelievers. The New Covenant was made with the Church – which is composed only of those who have God's Law written on their hearts, and who “know the Lord” (both Jews and Gentiles). And so at the last supper with His disciples, Jesus took the cup and said:

- ✓ Luke 22:20 — This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.

The *new* Covenant.

God has entered into a relationship with us, His Church, by means of this New Covenant – a covenant sealed with Christ's blood. And so now the Church is the “*Covenant Community*.” Because we are the ones with whom God has entered into “*Covenant Relationship*.” In the New Covenant, God *promises to us* all the blessings of His salvation and He *requires from us* faithful obedience to His law – just like the Old Covenant. But in the New Covenant God also guarantees the new creation of new hearts in the new birth.

- ✓ Romans 8:3–4 — For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

The New Covenant creates a whole new kind of Covenant Community (born again Church versus mixed Israel). That's how powerful, and wonderful, and beautiful the New Covenant is! In the New Covenant, God guarantees a permanent, everlasting relationship with His chosen people (no longer any need for covenant curses). That's how powerful, and wonderful, and beautiful the New Covenant is (cf. Heb. 7:22; 8:6-13)!

Can you see how important this whole idea of the covenant really is? The Bible is impossible to fully understand without understanding “covenant.” Apart from God’s gracious covenant, there is no salvation. Covenant is everything. And so it’s only natural that there should be regular and special times when the new covenant community comes together for **Covenant Renewal**. This is the *meaning* of the weekly “Lord’s Day” assembly” (Rev. 1:10; cf. Acts 20:7).

### **“Application” and Conclusion**

On the Lord’s Day we gather in “holy convocation” as the New Covenant Community, and all that we do together is designed to be a tool and expression of Covenant Renewal. This is why we sing together the hymns and choruses that we sing. This is why we read aloud together from the Scriptures. This is why we unite our hearts together in an *extended* period of congregational prayer. This is why we have a time for sharing together, and edifying, and building one another up in the Lord (not at all entertaining and can be messy). This is why we listen together to the preaching of the whole counsel of God’s Word. This is why we baptize. This is why we celebrate the Lord’s Supper. Covenant Renewal is the death of all things “entertaining” or “me-oriented” in the assembly. Covenant Renewal must define the nature of all our assemblies.

We could say that the Lord’s Supper is the climax and the grand finale of all true Covenant Renewal. Paul writes:

- ✓ 1 Corinthians 11:23–26 — For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, “This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

It’s true that Jesus never gave us any requirements for how often we “had” to eat the Lord’s Supper. But isn’t that because He assumed 100% desire? Certainly, Jesus assumed that we would take the Lord’s Supper *often* just like He assumed that we would meet together *often*. And it’s impossible for me to believe that once a week could ever come close to being *too* often – otherwise once a week would be too often for everything else that we do on the Lord’s Day. If every Lord’s Day Assembly is a time of Covenant Renewal, then how appropriate is it that these times of Covenant Renewal are built around the celebration of the Lord’s Supper? But even if we celebrate the Lord’s Supper only once a month, it is the meaning of the Lord’s Supper that should define the meaning of *every single* Lord’s Day assembly. Every single Lord’s Day assembly is God’s gracious provision for Covenant Renewal.

Why do we “go to church” (whether this church or any other)? Because it’s a good thing to do? Because it’s a healthy thing to do? Because the preaching is “good?” Because I “like” the singing and the worship is good? Because the people there are my friends? Because I want to grow in my Christian walk? Because there’s a verse that says I’m supposed to? Because I can’t imagine not going to church? Because I love going to church? None of these answers are good enough.

Why do we “go to church?” Because God has come to us in the New Covenant in Christ’s blood and entered into relationship with us. This New Covenant is so powerful that it has created a whole new Covenant Community called the Church. And as that New Covenant Community living in Covenant Relationship with God we now gather together in holy convocation every Lord’s Day for a solemn and joyful time of Covenant Renewal. Maybe now we can see how Hebrews 10:25 is so much more than just a proof text for “church attendance.”

- ✓ Hebrews 10:15–25 (NASB) — And the Holy Spirit also testifies to us; for after saying, “THIS IS THE COVENANT THAT I WILL MAKE WITH THEM AFTER THOSE DAYS, SAYS THE LORD: I WILL PUT MY LAWS UPON THEIR HEART, AND ON THEIR MIND I WILL WRITE THEM,” He then says, “AND THEIR SINS AND THEIR LAWLESS DEEDS I WILL REMEMBER NO MORE.” Now where there is forgiveness of these things, there is no longer any offering for sin [NEW COVENANT]. Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh [NEW COVENANT], and since we have a great priest over the house of God [NEW COVENANT], let *us* [together] draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water [COVENANT RENEWAL]. Let *us* [together] hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful [COVENANT RENEWAL]; and let *us* [together] 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 [COVENANT RENEWAL].

We see, then, why “going to Church” is important. Because it’s so much more than Church attendance – it’s a holy convocation of the Covenant Community for Covenant Renewal of its Covenant Relationship with God. Clearly, 100% *attendance* 100% of the time is not enough. We may be here every single Sunday, but *why* are we here (...)? **By faith**, are we here because of a 100% desire 100% of the time to participate in the gathering of the Covenant Community for Covenant Renewal? We need to be *conscious* every Sunday of the *reasons* we are here. Because of the sin that remains with in us, we need to be actively working every Sunday to bring these reasons into harmony with God’s Word. How often do we come wondering what we will get – wondering how things will turn out this Sunday? Instead, we should come knowing *already* exactly what we will get, and knowing *already* exactly what is going to happen. When we have embraced what God’s Word says by faith – believing that *this* really is what God’s Word says it is, then we *cannot possibly fail* to have 100% desire 100% of the time.

So how does all of this affect the priority of our “attendance” at the Lord’s Day assembly? We see that the question is not: “Should we go to church this week or not?”, but rather: “Will we participate this week in Covenant Renewal?” I am concerned that there should ever be in our church those who can too easily say, “No, I will not participate this week in the gathering of the Covenant People for Covenant Renewal.”

1. When **sports** compete with Covenant Renewal, what will 100% desire 100% of the time mean?
2. When **music** competes with Covenant Renewal, what will 100% desire 100% of the time mean?

3. When **hobbies** compete with Covenant Renewal, what will 100% desire 100% of the time mean?
4. When **jobs and work** compete with Covenant Renewal, what will 100% desire 100% of the time mean?
5. When **sleep** competes with Covenant Renewal, what will 100% desire 100% of the time mean?
6. When **family gatherings and celebrations** compete with Covenant Renewal, what will 100% desire 100% of the time mean?
7. When **vacations** compete with Covenant Renewal, what will 100% desire 100% of the time mean?

What is it that could ever compete with even one, *single* holy convocation of the Covenant Community for Covenant Renewal of our Covenant Relationship with God? Parents, we especially need to *model* this 100% desire 100% of the time to our children. And to all the children (including my own), may you even outdo your parents in this 100% *desire* 100% of the time.

As LWBC members, we have all affirmed that “we will engage, by the aid of the Holy Spirit, to give the *church* a place in our affections, prayers and services above every organization of human origin” (LWBC Member Statement of Commitment) May this be not only the joyful commitment of members, but of all faithful Christians. Praise God for His covenant with us. And praise God for giving us these precious weekly times of Covenant Renewal. To God alone be *ALL* the glory.