

LET'S GO TO CHURCH!

Today's Text: Psalm 122

Extract:

I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go into the house of the Lord" [Ps. 122: 1]

According to a recent report, of the more than 25 million people in England who identify themselves with the Church of England (the Anglican Church), only 1.2 million (under 5%) actually go to church services every week. Although 85% of Danes (people from Denmark) are Lutherans by baptism, only about 5% go to church regularly.¹ On the other hand, the Third World is reported to be first in church attendance, to the extent that "last Sunday more Presbyterians were at church in Ghana than in Scotland,"² the home of the founder of that denomination. In the United States where 83% of adults are Christians, 38% of Americans reportedly go to church services at least once a week.³ The churches that are growing in attendance are those "that are demanding in some way- that expect you to come two or three times a week, or not wear lipstick, or dress in a certain way- but at the same time offer you great rewards-community, a salvation."⁴

A major conclusion from the above reports is that church attendance has very little to do with where we live or come from but rather much more with what the church means to us. In other words, the problem is not with the world but with the church! What is the Presbyterian Church doing for worshippers in Ghana that their counterparts in Scotland are not getting? Why would Americans, supposedly from the most open democracy in the world, be more willing to attend churches with the greatest demand on their time and discretion than those that are user-friendly? The answers lie within the walls of the churches themselves.

The Psalmist says, "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go into the house of God.'" [Ps. 122: 1]. Are you glad when somebody tells you, "let's go to church"? That is the subject of today's lesson.

¹ "The Secularization of Europe," <http://scott.chattablogs.com/archives/007427.html> 13 October 2003

² "Third World is First in Church Attendance: Mark A. Knoll on trends in world Christianity," www.damico.org/warticles/third_world_first.htm

³ Dalia Sussman, "Who Goes to Church?" abcnews.com

⁴ "Evangelicals lead growth in America's church attendance," www.diolex.net/ens/2002-216d.htm

1. The Church at a glance

The word, church, comes from the Greek word, *ekklésia*, which means “the called out ones.” The first group of people to be called out (if we exclude Abraham and his family) were the children of Israel who were “called out” of Egypt. Interestingly, Stephen, the first recorded Christian martyr in the Bible, called them “the church in the wilderness” [Acts 7: 38]. Let us try to appreciate the spiritual significance of that statement.

Before their departure from Egypt, God instituted the *Passover* [Ex. 12: 1-28], which is a figure of the death of Christ on the cross for our redemption [Jn 1: 29]. God told the people to take a male lamb without blemish and put some of its blood on the two doorposts and on the lintels of their houses. The blood was a sign and when God saw it, the plague that He had put on Egypt (to kill the firstborn of every household) would pass them by [Ex. 12: 1-13]. It is the same way today that God shows mercy on us “for Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us” [1 Cor. 5: 7].

As Moses led the people out, there was a pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night to lead the way [Ex. 13: 21-22]. When they got to the banks of the Red Sea, the pillar passed over them and stayed behind them. Then, God parted the waters of the sea and the children of Israel crossed over on dry land [Ex. 14: 1-22]. When the people were hungry, He gave them manna from heaven [Ex. 16: 1-22], a figure of Jesus Christ, “the living bread which came down from heaven” [Jn 6: 51]. When the people became thirsty and they needed water. God commanded Moses to strike the rock and water gushed out [Ex. 17: 1-7]. Writing on this subject, Paul said [1 Cor. 10: 1-3]:

Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, all ate the same spiritual food and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ.

Following Peter’s accurate recognition of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, Jesus told him, “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it” [Matt. 16: 18]. When Jesus said, “on this rock,” did He point to Himself or to Peter? It was likely to the Lord Himself “for no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, *which is Jesus Christ*” [1 Cor. 3: 11]. Moreover, Peter translates as *petrus*, a masculine word, while the rock is *petra*, a feminine word. The rock that Moses struck in the wilderness is a figure of Christ as Paul has revealed to us above. Therefore, the rock on which the church is laid is Jesus Christ. That is why the church is called the body of Christ [1 Cor. 12: 27; Eph. 1: 22-23].

The church in the wilderness was baptized in the cloud (of the Holy Spirit) and in the Red Sea (of water), as revealed above. Jesus told Nicodemus, “unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” [Jn 3: 5]. When Jesus was going to ascend into Heaven, He gave His disciples the great commission, saying, “Go therefore and *make disciples of all nations, baptizing them* in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, *teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you*” [Matt. 28: 19]. For the church on earth to become the body and bride of Christ, it has to be spiritual, that is born again! Therefore, *water baptism is a necessary requirement for church membership.*

The Day of Pentecost marks the beginning of the modern church because it was on that day that three thousand converts who “gladly received [Peter’s] word, *were baptized* [and] were added to [the disciples]” [Acts 2: 41]. Today, the term, church, has come to be applied to the following:

a) *The body of Christ*

God has given His only begotten Son “to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all” [Eph. 1: 21-22]. So, the collectivity of all *true believers* constitutes the church for “you are the body of Christ, and *members individually*” [1 Cor. 12: 27]. Therefore, no matter where you worship, all *true believers* belong to “one body and one Spirit, ... one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all” [Eph. 4: 4-6].

b) *A specific denomination*

Even though we all use the same Bible, we belong to different denominations, none of which was founded by Jesus Christ Himself! Even in the early church, such divisions were already beginning to manifest themselves. It worried Paul so much that he had to write the Corinthian church, “Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, *that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.* For it has been declared to me... that each of you says, ‘I am of Paul,’ or ‘I am of Apollos,’ or ‘I am of Cephas,’ or ‘I am of Christ.’ Is Christ divided? [1 Cor. 1: 10, 12, 13]. The situation is worse today, with some denominations lording it over or condemning others or claiming sole right to salvation!

c) *A building*

We know that when the children of Israel finally arrived and settled down in the Promised Land, the church in the wilderness, following God’s order built a house in which to worship God. In dedicating the temple, Solomon

acknowledged that no man could build a house for God since He owns heaven and earth. Nonetheless, the house was meant as a place of worship [2 Chron. 2: 6]. God manifested His glory [the *Shekinah* glory] in that building as a church [2 Chron. 5: 1-12]. A few weeks later, God appeared at night to Solomon and told him, “I have chosen and *sanctified* this house, that My name may be there *forever, and My eyes and My heart will be there perpetually*” [2 Chron. 7: 16].

It follows that in any building where true believers congregate for worship, God is there among them. Jesus confirmed this when He said, “For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them” [Matt. 18: 20]. This is the kind of house that the Psalmist said that he would gladly go to if invited.

2. Why go to church?

Many believers have given up on going to church *largely* because of what is happening within. News reports are full of sex scandals in the clergy. Divorce and same-sex marriages have been condoned in some denominations under the guise of acting “progressive” or not wanting to judge others! Leaders have become arrogant and corrupt and followers have become apathetic and withdrawn. Under such circumstances, who wants to go to church?

There is so much to gain by going to church and here are some of the reasons:

a) *The church is a school*

When people want to know how to read and write, they go to school. In fact, most of us spent over eleven years in school [6 in elementary school plus 5-6 years in high school] before taking our first jobs. With globalization and rapid changes in Information and Communication Technology (ICT), *life learning* has become a new craze in modern schooling. Where do we then receive spiritual education of that magnitude?

The church plays that role. By worshipping with others and studying the Bible together, we learn the doctrine of our faith and watch the fruits of obedience (or disobedience) in others. There is no other social institution that can effectively play that role, especially in some societies where you cannot even mention God or pray in public gatherings!

In Old Testament times, the people went to Shiloh where the house of the Lord was then temporarily located. Samuel was sent as a child to live with Eli the priest so as to learn about worship and service, and “Samuel ministered before the Lord, even as a child, wearing a little ephod ... and the child Samuel grew in stature, and in favour both with the Lord and

men” [1 Sam. 2: 11, 18, 26]. At the age of 12, Jesus was in the temple “sitting in the midst of the *teachers, both listening to them and asking questions*” [Lk 2: 46]. Whoever wants to know more about God should attend church more regularly!

b) *The church is a gas station!*

You may have experienced that your spirituality level drops as you miss more and more church services. It is because you are running out of gas [Holy Spirit], and if you do not rush back for a refill, you may soon be driving on an empty tank! As you mix with a group of Spirit-filled worshippers, there is no way that you will not be *infected*. Even king Saul who had murder in his heart as he pursued David, when he came among the prophets in Samuel’s place of worship in Ramah, “the Spirit of God was upon him also, *and he went on and prophesied*” [1 Sam. 19: 23].

c) *The church is a hospital*

The motto of the Lagos University Teaching Hospital (LUTH), Nigeria, states, “We care, God heals.” What a spiritually profound statement! When Moses led the church in the wilderness to a place called Marah, the people were thirsty but the water there was bitter. The Lord showed Moses a tree to cast into the bitter waters. As soon as he had done that, the water became sweet. God told the church of the wilderness, “If you will diligently heed the voice of the Lord your God and do what is right in His sight, give ear to His commandments and keep all His statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you which I have brought on the Egyptians. *For I am the Lord who heals you*” [Ex. 15: 22-26]. *Jehovah Rophecha* is waiting in His holy house to also heal us!

Building on this point, James wrote, “Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for *the elders of the church* and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up” [Jam. 5: 14-15]. Many of the sick and demon-possessed that Jesus healed were brought to Him in the synagogue [Mk 1: 22-25; 3: 1-5]. Today, as shown on *TBN* (the Trinity Broadcasting Network), healing takes place during revival services organized by local churches. If you are not at your church services regularly, how can you benefit from such grace?

d) *The church is a sanctuary*

As we face the uncertainties and stresses of modern living, we may find it refreshing to go to where we can have some quiet and unwind. The church can play that role. David has said, “One thing I have asked of the Lord, that will I seek: *that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my*

life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in His temple” [Ps. 27: 4].

In your local church, you may come across apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers whom God has placed there “for the equipping of the saints, for the work of ministry (and) for the edifying of the body of Christ” [Eph. 4: 11-12]. By the time that you go for service on Sunday and two other days during the week, and Bible lesson and other events for the rest of the week, you find yourself spiritually alert to face the temptations and stresses of the world.

3. Conclusion

Here are the key points from today’s lesson:

- a) You are not a member of any church *until* you receive water baptism, just as you are not a graduate of a university until you are issued its diploma (or certificate). Jesus baptized new converts [Jn 3: 22; 4: 2]. Philip baptized the Ethiopian eunuch [Acts 8: 26-39]. Even when Cornelius and his household were already Spirit-filled and speaking in tongues, Peter still went ahead to give them water baptism [Acts 10: 47-48].
- b) Your baptism is for service, not just for salvation only. Therefore, you must join and *be active* in a local church in order to fulfill Christ’s mandate to evangelize the whole world, beginning from your locality [Matt. 28: 19-20]. Moreover, you need the local church to reinforce your spiritual growth and meet your material and physical needs.
- c) To be active means to take on a role because God has given each of us talents that we can use in His house [1 Cor. 12: 4-31; Eph. 4: 11]. If you cannot preach, you can at least clean the pulpit!
- d) There is no perfect church and don’t waste your time looking for one or thinking that your church is one! All the 7 churches in the book of Revelation, Chapters 2-3, had their strengths and weaknesses. None of them was perfect and they *typify* the churches of today. In the church in Shiloh where Eli the priest’s sons slept with women worshippers, that was where Samuel the great prophet was brought up [1 Sam. 2: 12-26]. The soul that sins shall die [Ezek. 18: 4]. The good news, however, is that *the body of Christ is perfect* because it is made up of true believers in *all the churches put together*. The Lord knows those who are His!

As a true believer, God lives within you as His temple. He also lives in His holy house, the church. Iron sharpens iron [Prov. 27: 17]. Therefore, like the Psalmist, you will have no problem saying, “I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go into the house of the Lord.’”

Let’s go to church!