

A MATTER OF CONVENIENCE?

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Many of you have no doubt noticed that when winter holidays are on or near regularly scheduled worship days, many congregations will alter their worship times (or cancel an evening service). This practice is common among many religious organizations and has even caught the attention of the press. The opinions that I've heard as to whether this practice puts God in second place or is a practical way to accommodate members' schedules vary widely. It's obvious that many elderships in the Lord's church are choosing to alter (or cancel) worship schedules to accommodate holidays but this is a good example of where we can apply biblical principles as we make judgments. As we consider this topic, I want to make clear that: 1) the times of assembly is an area of judgment; 2) my intent is not to pass judgment on those who come to different conclusions; 3) while it seems pragmatically appealing, I don't find any biblical principles that would favor altering established worship times for the convenience of our social calendars (collectively or individually).

I see two approaches represented by principles that frame the alternatives. On the one hand is a steadfast, unwavering, consistent, and purposeful approach that governs how we desire to honor God. On the other hand is a focus on the presumption that God is readily accessible, has not demanded a specific time of worship (other than gathering the first day of the week), and there is no need to be limited by the "or" in choosing to gather with the saints or celebrating a holiday, so by scheduling the times of worship after social events are properly accommodated, both can be satisfied.

God does not change (Mal 3:6), and so the Old Testament is a great place to understand how important it was for His people to gather when it was a time prescribed by Him. He said, "*Six days thou shalt do thy work, and on the seventh day thou shalt rest: that thine ox and thine ass may rest, and the son of thy handmaid, and the stranger, may be refreshed. And in all things that I have said unto you be circumspect: and make no mention of the name of other gods, neither let it be heard out of thy mouth. Three times thou shalt keep a feast unto me in the year*" (Exod 23:12-14). The Lord then went on to prescribe when He wanted them to keep the feasts and there was no altering it for purposes of celebrating something else.

An extraordinary example of steadfastness is seen in Daniel who refused to alter the times or the manner he prayed. "*Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went into his house; and his windows being open in his chamber toward Jerusalem, he kneeled upon his knees three times a day, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God, as he did aforetime*" (Dan 6:10). If ever there were a practical and acceptable alternative time or place to pray, I would think Daniel would qualify, but yet we see Daniel refusing to change a commitment he had made by his pattern of behavior and he was saved by God for what many today would see as a foolish inflexibility. The flipside of an example in the New Testament drew a rebuke to one of the apostles. "*But when Peter was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed. For before that*

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(continued)

certain came from James, he did eat with the Gentiles: but when they were come, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing them which were of the circumcision” (Gal 2:11-12). Nothing required that Peter always fellowship with the Gentiles but clearly when he changed his behavior for the wrong reason it was worthy of rebuke.

Our contribution is to be purposeful and without grudging or necessity (2 Cor 9:7). Let’s not mistake the fact that “purposeful” is not always “convenient.” I wonder if church leadership would suggest that contributions should be lowered during the holidays to allow for more convenient budgeting for gift giving, or for a birthday, or anniversary celebration, or graduation...you get the picture. It seems that God desires those who purpose and then fulfill.

No doubt the words of Jesus deeply stung the men who believed they could follow Christ and enjoy the convenience of personal matters: *“And he said unto another, Follow me. But he said, Lord, suffer me first to go and bury my father. Jesus said unto him, Let the dead bury their dead: but go thou and preach the kingdom of God. And another also said, Lord, I will follow thee; but let me first go bid them farewell, which are at home at my house. And Jesus said unto him, No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God”* (Luke 9:59-62). It’s an interesting question: Are we demonstrating that we’re fit for the Kingdom as we make our choices?

At the same time, we don’t set worship at 2 a.m. on Sunday or 10 p.m. because there is a need to consider what is best for the members. But once that purpose and time is set, could altering it for our convenience tell God that He is really second place? Jesus gave the definition of His “family” and “friends.” He said, *“For whosoever shall do the will of God, the same is my brother, and my sister, and mother* (Mark 3:35); and, *“Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you”* (John 15:14). Time will tell, but perhaps the rationale of changing (and even forsaking by some) the assembly times to spend time with family and friends will ring hollow on the Day of Judgment. A better alternative might be to demonstrate to those outside Christ that we love our brethren as Christ has loved us – and what better way to demonstrate their spiritual importance than choosing to be with them as purposed and planned?

Another consideration is whether we can consistently apply this without being a respecter of persons (Jas 2:9). There is no respect of persons with God (Rom 2:11). I haven’t heard of congregations rescheduling services in honor of Martin Luther King Day, Kwanzaa, Rosh Hashanah, Chinese New Year, Deepavali (Hindu New Year), etc., but if it’s done for Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year, (or the Super Bowl), why not for others? It makes me laugh to think of the reaction if a truncated Easter Sunday schedule were to be suggested. But I suppose such disparities are to be expected when man’s wisdom is involved. There are no doubt other points of view and considerations and it’s still a judgment but my vote would be to set our worship times and keep them.