

Text in FOCUS



Text in Focus number - 002

HEBREWS 10:25

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THE ISSUE

This text (Hebrews 10:25) is a passage under review because it is a passage which has been abused and misused for centuries. Scholars and novices use the text as a reason why folks today, should attend church. There are many reasons existing as to why Christians today, should fellowship, to gather in groups for worship, prayer, offering of thanks and good old fashioned Bible study. However this passage does not support any of these reasons. Again, there are many reasons why Christians should gather together, this is not our issue. The issue concerns whether or not THIS passage presents a reason why we today should gather together, or go to a local assembly.

The entire verse appears thusly;

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, First edition]

The text is very stable, and has no significant variations. In the Greek text, one notes that a couple of minuscule manuscripts do add a term which means *one another* after *encouraging* (as per the NASB's addition). The Greek term rendered as *assembling together* is επισυναγωγην, a compound word containing an affixed preposition and the Greek word for synagogue. There are basically no translation issues, rather it is how the verse is used today.

THE SOLUTION

The solution is quite simple; it is a matter of who is writing, when it was written, to whom, why and about what. Though simple, it is amazing how often exegetes and teachers ignore these basic observations (the who, what, when, why issues). Many many passages in the Bible lose their essential meanings or are twisted by ignoring these simple observations. Certainly when one reads most other literatures (newspapers, novels *et al*), the who, whom, what why, where questions are resolved and clear. But when many folks encounter the Bible, common sense is often ejected, in place of common sense tradition and or perversion seems to prevail. So hopefully, I shall demonstrate a little common sense herein.

Though the human author is not named, it is generally accepted that Paul is the author. I suggest that he wrote this epistle prior to, or at about the same time as he penned First Corinthians, circa A.D. 55. Hence, several years before the Jewish-Messianic church in Jerusalem fell into poverty (A.D. 57). It is clear to me that the epistle was sent to the Jewish-Messianic church in Jerusalem; it is via induction that I see the recipients as the early church in Jerusalem. Several good commentaries discuss who the epistle was sent to, opinions vary but almost all agree that it is a Jewish group addressed. In Lünemann's commentary (in H.A.W. Meyer's early editions) the issue of who the recipients are is nicely discussed, giving reasons why such-and-such a view stands or falls. No Gentiles are mentioned in the epistle (but Esau, Rahab), nor are any Gentile customs presented, it is thoroughly concerned with Jewish beliefs, practices and temple traditions. Simply reading the text generates these truly obvious assertions.

In the ages following the dissolution of the early apostolic church in Jerusalem, the dispersed orthodox Jews did maintain their identity by regularly going to the synagogue (συναγωγη). Christians are never told to attend synagogue services. Words for the Christian church and the Jewish synagogue are distinct in the New Testament. It is only during the pre-A.D. 70 era, that the Jewish Messianic church in Jerusalem may have also been referred to as a church. In James we note the Jewish oil of healing, and the request that members of this (or any) synagogue call to the elders of the CHURCH, and these folks can then come heal their sick. If expositors wish to follow the example in James, then they must also accept the signs, healings and miracles which accompanied believers in that era. The early church in Jerusalem was also referred to as a synagogue (perhaps James 2:2), those who formed the congregation were either Jews or proselytes, and Jewish law held sway right along side of Christ's teachings. As time passed the synagogues and Christianity separated completely, but in James' day (the period of Acts), there was much intermingling, a quote from W. Ward Gasque (*Eerdmans' Handbook to the History of Christianity*, page 68) sheds some confirmation:

...in spite of the growing divergence between the church and the synagogue, the Christian communities worshiped and operated essentially as Jewish synagogues for more than a generation.

Synagogue (συναγωγη) was used 56x in the Greek New Testament, and it always was a Jewish group. In James 2:2, the KJV and many others render the word as *assembly*, so in James' epistle we note a possible interchange of meanings, as at James 5:14, James uses the word for church εκκλησια; he may however, be addressing two separate groups.

The Messianic Jews in Jerusalem, did go to the Temple, up until its destruction in A.D. 70, and they attended to the synagogue services.

The later appearing important distinctions which Paul enumerated—betwixt Old Testament Law, Mosaic ceremonies, Temple services and Grace—were not well known prior to the publication of Paul's epistles. Unfortunately Paul nearly lost his life when confronting and trying to reach out to this quasi-Christian Messianic-Judaism, as per Acts 21:17-21:

And when we had come to Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly. And now the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. And after he had greeted them, he began to relate one by one the things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. And when they heard it they began glorifying God; and they said to him, "You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed, and they are all zealous for the Law; and they have been told about you, that you are teaching all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs. [NASB, First edition]

In the above quote, we see how the elders/synagogue/church in Jerusalem was still connected to elements of Judaism. They were not fully in error; as when the Millennium does begin, these Jews who looked for the returning Messiah, will have a Temple to go to, until then most Jews world-wide, attend the synagogue. It is error to insist that Hebrews 10:25 is telling Christians to attend their local assembly. Often religious vendors/peddlers try to make various folks feel guilty by quoting Hebrews 10:25, and telling them that the Bible states that THEY must go to a church or join their church! What these hawkers reveal is their shallow knowledge of the Bible. This text is for

us, not about us! There are other passages which encourage believers to attend a true Christian church (and such churches are becoming rare). After all Hebrews 10:25 is in the Bible!! the synagogue of Satan is in the Bible too, but that does not mean we should seek to join it!

The passage encourages Jews to continue to gather together, to try to maintain their identity. That is the primary meaning of the text. It is not a text telling Christians to go to or join some religious operation. Yet, operators of religious sects and groups encourage you to join them, and they will use Hebrew 10:25 as their primary reason. Pulling a verse out of the Bible and using it this way may convince some folks but if this new religion abuses Hebrew 10:25 in such a way, they may have many more surprises awaiting the naive client.

This method is a cheap, Bible-dishonoring way to try to trick folks into fellowshipping with some religious group.