

On Attending the Church Service

by John Wesley

The sermon discusses the corruption of the Church and the question of whether to separate from it because of unholy ministers, using biblical examples and teachings to guide the discussion.

Scripture: 1 Samuel 2:17, Jeremiah 23:1-2, Malachi 2:1-3, Matthew 11:28, Matthew 23:1-3, Mark 6:7, Romans 12:1-2, 1 Corinthians 5:11, 2 Corinthians 6:14, Hebrews 10:25

Topics: "Church Attendance", "Grace in Ministry"

Description

John Wesley addresses the issue of attending church services despite the presence of unholy ministers, emphasizing that the corruption of clergy has been a longstanding issue throughout church history. He argues that the grace of God can still be conveyed through the sacraments administered by unholy men, as seen in biblical examples, and that separating from the church due to the unholiness of ministers would lead to chaos and division among believers. Wesley encourages Christians to focus on promoting holiness and to remain engaged in the church, regardless of the character of its leaders, as the efficacy of God's ordinances is not dependent on the minister's personal holiness.

Transcript

"The sin of the young men was very great." 1 Sam. 2:17.

1. The corruption, not only of the heathen world, but likewise of them that were called Christians, has been matter of sorrow and lamentation to pious men, almost from the time of the apostles. And hence, as early as the second century, within a hundred years of St. John's removal from the earth, men who were afraid of being partakers of other men's sins, thought it their duty to separate from them. Hence, in every age many have retired from the world, lest they should be stained with the pollutions of it. In the third century many carried this so far as to run into deserts and turn hermits. But in the following age this took another turn. Instead of turning hermits, they turned monks. Religious houses now began to be built in every Christian country; and religious communities were established, both of men and women, who were entirely secluded from the rest of mankind; having no intercourse with their nearest relations, nor with any but such as were confined, generally for life, within the same walls.

2. This spirit of literally renouncing the world, by retiring into religious houses, did not so generally prevail after the Reformation. Nay, in Protestant countries, houses of this kind were totally suppressed. But still too many serious persons (chiefly incited thereto by those that are commonly called "mystic writers") were eager to seclude themselves from the world, and run into solitude; supposing this to be the best, if not the

only way, of escaping the pollution that is in the world.

3. One thing which powerfully inclined them to separate from the several churches, or religious societies, to which they had belonged, even from their infancy, was the belief that no good was to be expected from the ministration of unholy men. "What!" said they, "Can we think that a holy God will bless the ministry of wicked men? Can we imagine that they who are themselves strangers to the grace of God will manifest that grace to others? Is it to be supposed that God ever did, or ever will, work by the children of the devil? And if this cannot be supposed, ought we not to `come out from among them and be separate?'" [2 Cor. 6:14]

4. For more than twenty years this never entered into the thought of those that were called Methodists. But as more and more who had been brought up Dissenters joined with them, the brought in more and more prejudice against the Church. In process of time, various circumstances concurred to increase and confirm it. Many had forgotten that we were all at our first setting out determined members of the Established Church. Yea, it as one of our original rules, that every member of our Society should attend the church and sacrament, unless he had been bred among Christians of any other denomination.

5. In order, therefore, to prevent others from being puzzled and perplexed, as so many have been already, it is necessary, in the highest degree, to consider this matter thoroughly; calmly to inquire, whether God ever did bless the ministry of ungodly men, and whether he does so at this hour. Here is a plain matter of fact: If God never did bless it, we ought to separate from the Church; at least where we have reason to believe that the minister is an unholy man: If he ever did bless it, and does so still, then we ought to continue therein.

6. Nineteen years ago, we considered this question in our public Conference at Leeds, -- Whether the Methodists ought to separate from the Church; and after a long and candid inquiry, it was determined, namine contradicente, that it was not expedient for them to separate. The reasons were set down at large, and they stand equally good at this day.

7. In order to put this matter beyond all possible dispute, I have chosen to speak from these words, which give a fair occasion of observing what the dealings of God in his Church have been, even from so early a period: For it is generally allowed that Eli lived at least a thousand years before our Lord came into the world. In the verses preceding the text we read, (1 Sam. 2:12, &c.,) "Now the sons of Eli were sons of Belial; they knew not the Lord." They were wicked to an uncommon degree. Their profane violence, with respect to the sacrifices, is related with all its shocking circumstances in the following verses. But (what was a greater abomination still) "they lay with the women that assembled at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation." (1 Sam. 2:22.) On both these accounts, "the sin of the young men was very great; and men abhorred the offering of the Lord."

8. May I be permitted to make a little digression, in order to correct a mistranslation in the twenty-fifth verse? In our translation it runs thus: "They hearkened not unto the voice of their father, because the Lord would slay them." Ought it not rather to be rendered, "Therefore the Lord was about to slay them?" [1 Sam. 2:25] As if he had said, "The Lord would not suffer their horrid and stubborn wickedness to escape unpunished; but because of that wickedness, he slew them both in one day, by the hand of the Philistines." They did not sin (as might be imagined from the common translation) because God had determined to slay them; but God therefore determined to slay them, because they had thus sinned.

9. But to return: Their sin was the more inexcusable because they could not be ignorant of that dreadful consequence thereof, that, by reason of their enormous wickedness, "men abhorred the offering of the Lord." Many of the people were so deeply offended, that if they did not wholly refrain from the public worship, yet they attended it with pain; abhorring the Priests while they honoured the sacrifice.

10. And have we any proof that the Priests who succeeded them were more holy than them, than Hophni and Phinehas; not only till God permitted ten of the tribes to be separated from their brethren, and from the worship he had appointed; but even till Judah, as well as Israel, for the wickedness of the priests, as well as the people, were carried into captivity?

11. What manner of men they were about the time of the Babylonish captivity, we learn from various passages in the prophecy of Jeremiah: From which it manifestly appears, that people and priests wallowed in all manner of vices. And how little they were amended, after they were brought back into their own land, we may gather from those terrible words in the prophecy of Malachi: "And now, O ye priests, this commandment is for you. If ye will not hear, and if ye will not lay it to heart, to give glory unto my Name, saith the Lord of Hosts, I will send even a curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings: Yea, I have cursed them already, because ye would not lay it to heart. Behold, I will curse your seed, and I will spread dung upon your faces, even the dung of your solemn feasts; and one shall take you away with it." (Mal. 2:1-3.)

12. Such were the priests of God in their several generations, till he brought the great High Priest into the world! And what manner of men were they during the time that he ministered upon earth? A large and particular account of their character we have in the twenty-third chapter of St. Matthew; [Matt. 23] and a worse character it would be difficult to find in all the oracles of God. But may it not be said, "Our Lord does not there direct his discourse to the priests, but to the Scribes and Pharisees?" He does; but this is the same thing. For the scribes were what we now term Divines, -- the public teachers of the people. And many, if not most, of the Priests, especially all the strictest sort of them, were Pharisees; so that in giving the character of the Scribes and Pharisees he gives that of the Priests also.

13. Soon after the pouring out of the Holy Ghost on the day of Pentecost, in the infancy of the Christian Church, there was indeed a glorious change. "Great grace was then upon them all," Ministers as well as people. "The multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul." But how short a time did this continue! How soon did the fine gold become dim! Long before even the apostolic age expired, St. Paul himself had ground to complain, that some of his fellow-labourers had forsaken him, having "loved the present world." And not long after, St. John reproved divers of the angels, that is, the ministers, of the churches in Asia, because, even in that early period, their "works were not found perfect before God."

14. Thus did "the mystery of iniquity" begin to "work," in the Ministers as well as the people, even before the end of the apostolic age. But how much more powerfully did it work, as soon as those master-builders, the Apostles, were taken out of the way! Both Ministers and people were then farther and farther removed from the hope of the gospel. Insomuch that when St. Cyprian, about an hundred and fifty years after the death of St. John, describes the spirit and behaviour both of the laity and clergy that were round about him, one would be ready to suppose he was giving us a description of the present clergy and laity of Europe. But the corruption which had been creeping in drop by drop, during the second and third century, in the beginning of the fourth, when Constantine called himself a Christian, poured in upon the church with a full tide. And whoever reads the history of the church, from the time of Constantine to the Reformation, will easily observe that all the abominations of the heathen world, and, in following ages, of the

Mahometans, overflowed every part of it. And in every nation and city the Clergy were not a whit more innocent than the laity.

15. "But was there not a very considerable change in the body of the Clergy, as well as the laity, at the time of the glorious Reformation from Popery?" Undoubtedly there was; and they were not only reformed from very many erroneous opinions, and from numberless superstitious and idolatrous modes of worship, till then prevailing over the Western Church, but they were also exceedingly reformed with respect to their lives and tempers. More of the ancient, scriptural Christianity was to be found, almost in every part of Europe. Yet notwithstanding this, all the works of the devil, all ungodliness and unrighteousness, sin of every kind, continued to prevail, both over Clergy and laity, in all parts of Christendom. Even those Clergymen who most warmly contended about the externals of religion were very little concerned for the life and power of it; for piety, justice, mercy, and truth.

16. However, it must be allowed, that ever since the Reformation, and particularly in the present century, the behaviour of the Clergy in general is greatly altered for the better. And should it be granted, that, in many parts of the Romish Church, they are nearly the same as they were before, it must be granted likewise, that most of the Protestant Clergy are far different from what they were. They have not only more learning of the most valuable kind, but abundantly much more religion: Insomuch that the English and Irish Clergy are generally allowed to be not inferior to any in Europe, for piety, as well as for knowledge.

17. And all this being allowed, what lack they yet? Can anything be laid to their charge? I wish calmly and candidly to consider this point, in the fear and in the presence of God. I am far from desiring to aggravate the defects of my brethren, or to paint them in the strongest colours. Far be it from me to treat others as I have been treated myself; to return evil for evil, or railing for railing. But, to speak the naked truth, (not with anger or contempt, as too many have done,) I acknowledge that many, if not most, of those that were appointed to minister in holy things, with whom it has been my lot to converse in almost every part of England or Ireland, for forty of fifty years last past, have not been eminent either for knowledge or piety. It has been loudly affirmed, that most of those persons now in connexion with me, who believe it their duty to call sinners to repentance, having been taken immediately from low trades, -- tailors, shoemakers, and the like, -- are a set of poor, stupid, illiterate men, that scarce know their right hand from their left: Yet I cannot but say, that I would sooner cut off my right hand, than suffer one of them to speak a word in any of our chapels, if I had not reasonable proof that he had more knowledge in the Holy Scriptures, more knowledge of himself, more knowledge of God and of the things of God, than nine in ten of the Clergymen I have conversed with, either at the Universities or elsewhere.

18. In the meantime, I gladly allow that this charge does not concern the whole body of the Clergy. Undoubtedly there are many Clergymen in these kingdoms, that are not only free from outward sin, but men of eminent learning; and, what is infinitely more, deeply acquainted with God. But still I am constrained to confess, that the far greater part of those Ministers I have conversed with for above half a century, have not been holy men, not devoted to God, not deeply acquainted either with God or themselves. It could not be said that they set their "affections on things above, not on things of the earth;" or that their desire, and the business of their lives, was, to save their own souls and those that heard them.

19. I have taken this unpleasing view of a melancholy scene, -- of the character of those who have been appointed of God to be shepherds of souls for so many ages, -- in order to determine this question: "Ought the children of God to refrain from his ordinances because they that administer them are unholy men?" a question with which many serious persons have been exceedingly perplexed. "Ought we not," say they,

"to refrain from the ministrations of ungodly men? For is it possible that we should receive any good from the hands of those that know not God? Can we suppose, that the grace of God was ever conveyed to men by the servants of the devil?"

What saith the Scripture? Let us keep close to this, and we shall not be misled. We have seen there what manner of men most of these have been who have ministered in holy things for many ages. Two or three thousand years ago, we read, "The sons of Eli were sons of Belial; they knew not the Lord." But was this a sufficient reason for the Israelites to refrain from their administrations? It is true they "abhorred the offerings of the Lord" on their account; and yet they constantly attended them. And do you suppose that Samuel, holy as he was, ever advised them to do otherwise? Were not the priests, and public teachers, equally strangers to God, from this time to that of the Babylonish captivity? Undoubtedly they were. But did Isaiah, or any of the Prophets, exhort them, for that cause, to forsake the ordinances of God? Were they not equally ungodly from the time of the Babylonish captivity, to the coming of Christ? How clearly does this appear, were there no other proof, from the Prophecies of Jeremiah and Malachi! Yet did either Malachi, or Jeremiah, or any other of the Prophets, exhort the people to separate themselves from these ungodly men?

20. But, to bring the matter nearer to ourselves: Never were any Priests, or public teachers, more corrupt, more totally estranged from God, than those in the days of our blessed Lord. Were they not mere whited walls? Were not those that were the best of them painted sepulchres; full of pride, lust, envy, covetousness, of all ungodliness and unrighteousness? Is not this the account which our Lord himself, who knew what was in man, gives of them? But did he therefore refrain from that public service which was performed by these very men, or did he direct his Apostles so to do? Nay, just the contrary: In consequence of which, as he constantly attended them himself, so likewise did his disciples.

21. There is another circumstance in our Lord's conduct, which is worthy of our peculiar consideration. He calls to him the twelve, and sends them forth, two by two, to preach the gospel. (Mark 6:7.) And as they did not go the warfare at their own cost, the very "devils were subject unto them." Now, one of these was Judas Iscariot. And did our Lord know that "he had a devil?" St. John expressly tells us he did. Yet he was coupled with another of the Apostles, and joined with them all in the same communion: Neither have we any reason to doubt but God blessed the labour of all his twelve ambassadors. But why did our Lord send him among them? Undoubtedly for our instruction: For a standing, unanswerable proof, that he "sendeth by whom he will send;" that he can and doth send salvation to men even by those who will not accept of it themselves.

22. Our Lord gives us farther instruction upon this head: In Matthew 23:1-3, we have those very remarkable words, "Then Jesus spoke to the multitude, and to his disciples, saying, The scribes and Pharisees sit in Moses' chair: All things, therefore, whatsoever they bid you observe, observe and do; but do not according to their works: For they say, and do not." [Matt. 23:1-3] Of these very men, he gives the blackest character in the following verses. Yet is he so far from forbidding either the multitude, or his own disciples, to attend their ministrations, that he expressly commands them so to do, even in those words, "All things whatsoever they bid you observe, observe and do." These words imply a command to hear them: For how could they "observe and do what they bid them, if they did not hear it? I pray consider this, ye that say of the successors of these ungodly men, "They say, and do not; therefore, we ought not to hear them." You see, your Master draws no such inference; nay, the direct contrary. O be not wiser than your Master! Follow his advice and do not reason against it!

23. But how shall we reconcile this with the direction given by St. Paul to the Corinthians? "If any that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, with such an one, no not to eat." (1 Cor. 5:11.) How is it reconcilable with that direction in his Second Epistle, (2 Cor. 6:17,) "Come out from the midst of them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing?" I answer, The former passage has no relation at all to the present question. It does not concern Ministers, good or bad. The plain meaning of it is, Have no intimacy with any that is called a Christian, and lives in any open sin; -- a weighty exhortation, which should be much attended to by all the children of God. As little does the other passage refer to Ministers or teachers of any kind. In this the Apostle is exhorting the children of God to break off all intercourse with the children of the devil. The words literally are, "Go out from the midst of them, and be ye separate, and touch not the unclean thing;" intimating that they could not continue united with them, without being more or less partakers of their sins. We may therefore boldly affirm, that neither St. Paul, nor any other of the inspired writers, ever advised holy men to separate from the Church wherein they were, because the Ministers were unholy.

24. Nevertheless, it is true, that many pious Christians, as was observed before, did separate themselves from the Church, some even in the second, and many more in the third, century. Some of these retired into the desert, and lived altogether alone; others built themselves houses, afterwards termed convents, and only secluded themselves from the rest of the world. But what was the fruit of this separation? The same that might easily be foreseen. It increased and confirmed, in an astonishing degree, the total corruption of the Church. The salt which was thus heaped up in a corner had effectually lost its savour. The light which was put under a bushel no longer shone before men. In consequence of this, ungodliness and unrighteousness reigned without control. The world, being given up into the hands of the devil, wrought all his works with greediness; and gross darkness, joined with all manner of wickedness, covered the whole earth.

25. "But if all this wickedness was not a sufficient reason for separating from a corrupt church, why did Calvin and Luther, with their followers, separate from the Church of Rome?" I answer, They did not properly separate from it; but were violently thrust out of it. They were not suffered to continue therein, upon any other terms than subscribing to all the errors of that Church, and joining in all their superstition and idolatry. Therefore this separation lay at their door. With us it was not a matter of choice, but of necessity: And if such necessity was now laid upon us, we ought to separate from any Church under heaven.

26. There were not the same reasons why various bodies of men should afterwards separate from the Church of England. No sinful terms of communion were imposed upon them; neither are at this day. Most of them separated, either because of some opinions, or some modes of worship, which they did not approve of. Few of them assigned the unholiness either of the Clergy or laity as the cause of their separation. And if any did so, it did not appear that they themselves were a jot better than those they separated from.

27. But the grand reason which many give for separating from the Church, namely, that the Ministers are unholy men, is founded on this assertion: That the ministration of evil men can do no good; that we may call the sacraments means of grace; but men who do not receive the grace of God themselves cannot convey that grace to others. So that we can never expect to receive the blessing of God through the servants of the devil.

This argument is extremely plausible, and is indeed the strongest that can be urged. Yet before you allow it to be conclusive, you should consider a few things.

28. Consider, First, Did the Jewish sacraments convey no saving grace to the hearers, because they were administered by unholy men? If so, none of the Israelites were saved from the time of Eli to the coming of Christ. For their Priests were not a whit better than ours, if they were not much worse. But who will dare to affirm this? which is no less, in effect, than to affirm, that all the children of Israel went to hell for eleven or twelve hundred years together!

29. Did the ordinances, administered in the time of our blessed Lord, convey no grace to those that attended them? Surely then the Holy Ghost would not have commended Zacharias and Elizabeth for walking in these ordinances! If the ministrations of wicked men did no good, would our Lord have commanded his followers (so far from forbidding them) to attend those of the Scribes and Pharisees? Observe, again, the remarkable words: (Matt. 23:1, &c. :) "Then spake Jesus to the multitude, and to his disciples, saying, The scribes and Pharisees sit in Moses' seat," -- are your appointed teachers; "all, therefore, whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do." Now, what were these Scribes and Pharisees? Were they not the vilest of men? Yet these very men he commands them to hear. This command is plainly implied in those words, "Whatsoever they command you to observe, that observe and do." For unless they heard what they said, they could not do it.

30. Consider, a little farther, the dreadful consequences of affirming that wicked Ministers do no good; that the ordinances administered by them do not convey saving grace to those that attend them. If it be so, then well nigh all the Christians from the time of the Apostles to that of the Reformation are perished! For what manner of men were well nigh all the Clergy during all those centuries? Consult the history of the church in every age, and you will find more and more proofs of their corruption. It is true, they have not been so openly abandoned since; but ever since that happy period there has been a considerable change for the better in the Clergy as well as the laity. But still there is reason to fear that even those who now minister in holy things, who are outwardly devoted to God for that purpose, (yea, and in Protestant as well as Romish countries,) are nevertheless far more devoted to the world, to riches, honour, or pleasure, (a few comparatively excepted,) than they are to God: So that in truth they are as far from Christian holiness as earth is from heaven. If then no grace is conveyed by the ministry of wicked men, in what a case is the Christian world! How hath God forgotten to be gracious! How hath he forsaken his own inheritance! O think not so! Rather say with our own Church, (though in direct opposition to the Church of Rome, which maintains, "If the Priest does not minister with a pure intention," which no wicked man can do, "then the sacrament is no sacrament at all,") the unworthiness of the Minister doth not hinder the efficacy of God's ordinance. The reason is plain, because the efficacy is derived, not from him that administers, but from Him that ordains it. He does not, will not suffer his grace to be intercepted, though the messenger will not receive it himself.

31. Another consequence would follow from the supposition that no grace is conveyed by wicked Ministers; namely, that a conscientious person cannot be a member of any national Church in the world. For wherever he is, it is great odds, whether a holy Minister be stationed there; and if there be not, it is mere lost labour to worship in that congregation. But, blessed be God, this is not the case; we know by our own happy experience, and by the experience of thousands, that the word of the Lord is not bound, though uttered by an unholy minister; and the sacraments are not dry breasts, whether he that administers be holy or unholy.

32. Consider one more consequence of this supposition, should it ever be generally received. Were all men to separate from those Churches where the Minister was an unholy man, (as they ought to do, if the grace of God never did nor could attend his ministry,) what confusion, what tumults, what commotions would this occasion throughout Christendom! What evil-surmisings, heart-burnings, jealousies, envyings, must everywhere arise! What censuring, tale-bearing, strife, contention! Neither would it stop here; but from evil words the contending parties would soon proceed to evil deeds; and rivers of blood would soon be shed, to the utter scandal of Mahometans and Heathens.

33. Let us not then trouble and embroil ourselves and our neighbours with unprofitable disputations, but all agree to spread, to the uttermost of our power, the quiet and peaceable gospel of Christ. Let us make the best of whatever ministry the Providence of God has assigned us. Near fifty years ago, a great and good man, Dr. Potter, then Archbishop of Canterbury, gave me an advice for which I have ever since had occasion to bless God: "If you desire to be extensively useful, do not spend your time and strength in contending for or against such things as are of a disputable nature; but in testifying against open notorious vice, and in promoting real, essential holiness." Let us keep to this: Leaving a thousand disputable points to those that have no better business than to toss the ball of controversy to and fro, let us keep close to our point. Let us bear a faithful testimony, in our several stations, against all ungodliness and unrighteousness, and with all our might recommend that inward and outward holiness "without which no man shall see the Lord!"

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