

## On the Duty to Attend Congregational Meetings

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Dear brothers in Christ, unfortunately, it has become the habit of many among us to absent themselves from our congregational meetings, even with no good reason for doing so. I have especially found this to be the case amongst many who have only recently been received by the congregation, who are eager to attend Church but almost never attend congregational meetings. Since many do this, who otherwise actively try to pursue a Christian walk, it seems obvious to me that they must not be absenting themselves out of any ill will nor from an intent to sin by despising congregational order, but because of erroneous thinking, or lack of knowledge as to why this habitual behavior of theirs is contemptible and sinful.

Now it is my duty as caretaker of souls (*Seelsorger*) in this congregation to see to it that nothing sinful or destructive sets in, much less, that it become acceptable. Since it is demanded of my calling and my office according to God's Word that I, as St. Paul writes in 2 Tim. 4: "preach the Word without ceasing, in season and out, rebuking, threatening, admonishing with all patience and teaching," so I am immediately confronting this foe that is stealing in among us with God's Word.

But before I do so, I want to begin by saying: It might, indeed, seem at first that it's patently wrong and repugnant to let this issue rise to the point of being mortally sinful. But in doing so it is in no way my intention to charge those who have been guilty of this up until now, for, I repeat, as I must explain in love, they have probably only done so because they have not yet correctly perceived the nature of this matter and have been led to do so by an erroneous way of thinking about it. I don't want to wound them any further, but to heal them. I would not frighten them with the thunder of the law like those I don't regard as Christians, but as people whom I trust have a willingness to heed God in every matter for clarification, not to see congregational meetings and attending them as matters that depend on human whim, but on the order and command of God.

So then heed my reasons and judge for yourselves that: It is the sacred duty of every eligible voting member of the congregation not to neglect the Congregational assembly for no good reason, and, indeed:

1. because if everyone would neglect it, the congregation would thereby already be preparing for its demise.

Christ declared: "Everything you would want others to do unto you, you must do unto them. Thus the Law and the Prophets." So whenever a Christian does something, he lays this yard stick as a test of his conduct. He asks himself, how do you wish others might act in this situation? That's what he directs himself to do. Therefore he must necessarily also ask himself what would happen if everyone wanted to act as he does? If he sees that everyone's doing what he did wouldn't be good, he won't do it himself.

Congregational meetings are indispensably necessary if our congregations are to remain in existence under our present circumstances. We have no consistories and no local church inspection, and I must add, "Thank God!" that we do not have such authorities as pedagogues who take care of everything for us while we sit back and nap. Everything included in the administration of congregational circumstances, instituting external order, the control of moneys coming in and going out, almsgiving, the conduct of church discipline and in passing the

Church's judgement over matters of doctrine and life are in our hands, and therefore upon our conscience. What would become of our congregation if we didn't hold any meetings where all this is taken up and cared for? How can things proceed in an orderly way in God's house if we don't discuss and unite together over the order that's necessary, according to our circumstances? How can each person legitimately take part and be appropriately informed in the duty he bears as a contributor, in his shared responsibility for the support of the Church and School offices, the facilities, the churchly furnishings and to cover all the other needs, if we did not from time to time also meet for those purposes? How could our poor be supported with our strength, their troubles all be brought to acknowledgment and all be done, keeping them in mind, if only a few or only one person were entrusted with all that, so everything would be left to their insight and good ideas? Who, then, would ever know who's a member and who isn't? And who would be responsible to decide what feasts would be celebrated, at what time and by what divine order our public services ought to be held? Where would we have opportunity to carry out the third step of admonition and rebuke? Christ says in Mt. 18: "If your brother sins against you - rebuke him - if he does not hear you, then take one or two with you - if he does not hear them, tell it to the church. If he does not hear the church, then regard him as a heathen man or a tax collector." So now where is our church to be found when someone wants to go to her, according to this command of Christ, if we were to have no meeting? Where then is this highest court of church justice, where the innocent will find their rights granted and the guilty, as St. Paul says in 2 Cor.2, can be "punished by many"? Where then is the church that judges according to God's Word and then, when necessary, places obstinate sinners under the ban, declares them to be heathen and tax collectors, to amputate the rotting member from their body so it does not infect the whole? Where then is the church to be found when the preacher begins to mislead her through false doctrine, and the church, then, must judge this most important matter, that is, whether the Gospel of Christ is being rightly taught or being falsified and destroyed? Further, where is the church when a pure teacher is being slandered as if he were a false teacher, a heretic, and when he now appeals to the judgement of his whole flock? There can be no doubt. Our congregation must, sooner or later assemble, and everything that is most confusing must be discussed there, for if the most troubling circumstances therein would have to remain unresolved, this whole place would have to become a disorderly house divided against itself that has thus completely lost the true form of an apostolic congregation, if every single member does not take his part in the rule and administration of the congregation, if no congregational assembly were ever to convene again, or if, in its place, another institution weren't established that was fully invested with this duty.

So how must we respond when people so often say: "I go to Church and holy Communion, I give my contribution, by God's grace I live a Christian life - isn't that enough for a Christian to do?" - That may certainly be true for you personally. That might be enough. But it's not enough for your neighbor or your congregation. What you allow yourself, you must also allow

others. You must then concede that everyone can stay away from the congregational meeting. How must that end up? – You must then necessarily lose what you now enjoy, that you confess you cherish so highly. But as the most valuable gifts require a container in which they are carried, so the church also requires the container of human administration so long as the church contends in this world; an external order, discipline and a visible seat of judgement. Now if you do not take an active part in the congregation's meetings, you are neglecting a precious, divine obligation.

But some will perhaps respond: The church won't be ruined if I don't come. Others attend in whom I place my full trust that they will take care of everything just as I would want.

This objection leads me to the **second reason** why it is a sacred duty for every eligible voter not to needlessly neglect the congregational assembly. It is this: **because it is unjust to let others work for you if you are just as obligated to do it as they are**. It is an inexpressible blessing when even any number of Christians unite to establish an orthodox preaching and school office, to maintain it and to take care and make provisions that it all be firmly established for the future. Now whoever has enjoyed the benefits of something with everyone else must also bear the burdens that brings with everyone else. This Word of the apostle seems applicable here: "Whoever will not work must not eat." So it is thoroughly unjust for you to enjoy your rest at home, or work to place yourself in service to money, or go on a vacation trip, or want to build something and not care about your brothers assembling there for what you and all the rest need, at the expense of their own time, service and any possible return. To be clear, you are refusing to labor for what serves to benefit the congregation and to join their efforts to care for it. You will not put aside what is less important to care for, to sweat, to work and even endure the many unmentionable things that are said while trying to mitigate various congregational conflicts. How will you reconcile all that with the royal law of love, when you enjoy the benefits of a Christian congregation, even if you are one of the greatest bearers of the congregation's financial burden, but won't shoulder the often most uncomfortable, and most essential and heart rending activities that the church needs in order to exist? For you certainly do not eat of your own bread in spiritual matters. So? Shouldn't you blush at the passage in Gal. 6.2: "**Bear the burdens of others and thus fulfill the law of Christ**"? **Must you not chide yourself when the holy Apostle cries into your heart: "Let each look not to his own concerns but those of others"**? (Phil. 2.4) So can you quietly sit home when you know that right now your brothers are meeting to bear their congregation's burdens. Won't you then run to join in the labor to lend a helping hand if you are able?

"But that's the main reason I don't come. I believe I have little to contribute to that work," is what many may be saying in their heart at this point. If that's you, listen now to my **third reason** that all are responsibility to take part in our assembly, which is this: **Because every Christian has received his gifts from God and, indeed, they are to be used for the common good**. For thus says the apostle Paul in 1 Cor. 7.7: "Each has his own gifts from God, one this, another that," and, further, in Rom. 12.4-6: "In the same way as we have many members in one body, but all members do not have the same properties, so we are one body in Christ, but amongst each other we are different members and have various gifts according to the grace that is given us." Going on to 1 Cor. 12: "The gifts of the Spirit are manifested in each and every one for the common use. – Even the body is not one member, but many. But if the foot should say, 'I am not a hand so I am not a part of the body,' should it thus not be a part of the body? And if the ear

should say, 'I am not an eye, therefore I am not a member of the body,' should it therefore not be a member of the body? If the whole body were an eye, how could it hear? If the whole body were for hearing, how would it smell? But now God has established each of the individual parts of the body as he has desired. – So now there are many parts of the body, but the body is one. The eye cannot say to the hand: 'I don't need you,' nor, on the other hand, the head to the foot, 'I don't need you.' But much rather the members of the body that we consider to be the weakest are the ones most necessary. – God has now arranged the body so the neediest members are accorded the most honor so there is no division in the body, but rather each member has the same concern for the others." So far the holy apostle. With this glorious metaphor of the church and her members as the human body and the relationship of the members to each other, St. Paul cuts off every kind of notion that some individual Christian in the church has nothing to offer. No, each has his gifts that serve and should be used for the edification and support of the blessings of the church. And those gifts that seem to reason to be the most unfruitful are often the most important. If you do not have great knowledge, nor are especially eloquent, nor deeply insightful, you can still often bring great benefit to the congregation if you only raise your voice in favor of what is best, when you give acknowledgment of your disapproval of unchristian behavior that arises; when you show eager support for what is good, when you exhibit discretion, humility, love, respect and conciliation, etc. Then, according to the apostle in the passage just cited that spoke about the gifts of all Christians, he finally calls out: "But strive after the best gifts." – and what does he mean by that? He himself explains: "Strive after love." – O, let every one come with only this prayer into the assembly: LORD, let me also bring a little something for the use and good of all, thus let even each person be a blessing to the whole congregation. The simple, plainspoken witness is often more powerful than a most eloquent and clever statement made contentiously.

Yet I would go further. The **fourth reason** for what I am presently admonishing is this: **Because through missing the congregational assembly on the part of individual members the congregation is always held back a bit when she wants to take steps towards improvement**. The experience that we have often mentioned before speaks so loudly to this point that it makes it barely necessary to bring this statement before each person's awareness. Time and time again, after long, often very laborious and weighty discussions and battles, something finally gets nicely decided. You're glad that God finally granted us to arrive at a consensus in some significant matter. It's seen as a battle that has already been waged with much exertion of effort and sacrifice, and behold, some member or other that was neither there in the battle nor at the peaceful settlement finally shows up after it's all over and raises some new thought that, perhaps, makes the labor of a whole month or even longer useless. Isn't that sad and tragic? Who will be answerable to God for that, if his laziness and negligence was responsible for that? – What's next? Either the congregation won't take the matter up again and would now have to let it drop and be seen as loveless and burdened in her conscience; or the congregation must start all over again and, for the sake of that one person, write off all that time and labor expended with tireless patience and love; but the natural consequence would be that the majority would be despondent, I might say, just frustrated with the whole assembly, become sick of the issue, and feel moved to groan against that brother. O, how much precious time would we not have wasted, how many fewer useless words would have been spoken, how many fewer bitter feelings would have been raised, how many more steps towards

our improvement might we have made, how much further along might we now have been in so many matters if each and every member had better followed through in their duty, who all have their own part to play for the general good! O that those who are now feeling a twinge at this would not let their hearts be embittered and poisoned against this, but rather that they would let this soften them to say: Dear brothers! You won't have to do my work any longer. I myself will lend a hand. Never again will I be guilty of making you waste your effort. If I have an objection, you will hear it at the appropriate time. I want to conform to the law of love, for by that everyone will know whether or not we are Christ's disciples.

But now some might object here, I am not one of those who needlessly hold things up. I waive my vote whenever I have not been present in the assembly and call everything good that has been decided, even if I wasn't there. This brings to mind the **fifth reason**. It is this: **Because it is a violation of conscience to agree to something others have proposed without your doing the necessary evaluation of it.** A matter can be judged with much more certainty if you've heard and weighed the reasons for and against it. A matter may often appear to us, at first blush, to be most laudable and obvious, but one single remark that some brother makes about it casts it in such a bright light that we're immediately moved to change our opinion. And again, isn't it a violation of conscience that, not having been present during the discussion, one's deciding vote is often withheld from an important matter? In no way will my conscience come to terms with that. With that, I must also mention that in our assembly witness is received about strangers who want to join us; now when a person is absent just then, who could perhaps give better information about an unscrupulous person, then, through his sin, a mangy sheep would be received to infect the whole flock, or a few felons might even be admitted into our midst who would cause our doctrine to be blasphemed and give us a bad reputation.

But now yet hear my **sixth reason**. It consists of this: **"because through that lack of participation the freedom of the congregation would necessarily be at risk of her governance falling into the hands of a very few."** I ask you, dear brothers, what is it that we have discovered after years of a troubled and heavy conscience from out of the pure preaching of the Gospel through God's unspeakable, tender mercy, that has been such an immeasurable blessing to us? It is ecclesial freedom. It is salvation from out of tyrannical, spiritual pedagogy; it is the enjoyment of an apostolic constitution of the congregation [church], in which each is equal to each other, all have their voice, to whom everything belongs, where no one may issue human commands and no one must be obedient to people, in which the Word of God is the sole rule and the law of love, of peace and discipline and order. Yes, thanks be to God, there does exist among us a relationship between the congregation and her teacher and between the elected officers and the members, as we find this in the Scriptures. For there we read that in the assemblies where matters of doctrine, church administration and church discipline had to be settled, all were present and all their voices had equal standing, as we read, to cite just one example, in the 15<sup>th</sup> Chapter of the Acts of the Apostles: In Antioch a controversy arose whether newly converted Gentiles must be circumcised. As they could not come to unity over it, Paul and Barnabas were sent to Jerusalem to reach a determination according to God's Word. The entire congregation, along with the elders and apostles met together for this. The latter presided. A great dispute arose that would finally be settled by two discourses, that is, by Peter and James. The conclusion would finally be put in writing and signed in the name of the apostles, the elders and all the brothers. See

here the glorious equality that was observed at that time in the governance of the church. ***It is self evident that the women and children were obviously excluded, since the apostle clearly says in 1 Cor. 14. "Let your women be silent in the midst of the congregation, for it is not permitted them to speak, but rather to be submissive, as the law also says. But if they want to learn something, then she may ask her husband privately. It is shamefully wrong for a woman to speak in the midst of the congregation."*** ***But of the minor children the apostle Peter says 1,5.5. "Let your youth be subject to their parents." So the children, as it stated in the Greek, must not be drawn to take part in the governance of the church. – If you compare this with our constitution you will find this true apostolic form restored.*** No one has experienced greater harm to their souls from the tragedy that results when a misconception exists at the root of our ecclesiology. No one should, therefore, have a more vivid knowledge what a blessing we have, when we look back on that, than we ourselves. Thousands long for this in vain. So? Could we then act in a more foolish and ignorant way than if we did not do everything we could to preserve this great possession of ecclesial freedom? But what other outcome can result from this ever more prevalent habit of missing congregational meetings than that only a few will and must take care of the church administration? What will happen then, when dishonest men take leadership? – These will then ultimately claim for themselves an ongoing exclusive right to it. This lack of appreciation for that freedom will result in a great longing for the same. Especially should, God forbid, a congregation receive a power hungry preacher. He will be all too glad to use the passivity of the congregation in matters of governance to take over as he wishes with a few of his favorites, and his lordship over consciences might only be discovered when it is too late. Why aren't many congregations out East more free? Is it at all because they couldn't remain free? No. There is no ecclesial tyranny, be it in a small or a large Church body, that finds any protection in the laws of America. Here is where the reason lies: Lack of attention and inertia have gratuitously sold and squandered this precious possession. Woe to us, therefore, if the individual loses his interest for the whole, if ultimately the individual imagines: I go to church. That's enough! I have no time to be troubled with the whole congregation! That's not part of my job (meines Amtes)! – When such thoughts finally permeate the majority, and that unwillingness or indifference for the general welfare becomes dominant, the time will have also come when we ourselves will be making funeral arrangements for our precious freedom.

But now I can hear someone or another object: Who would want to attack me for merely forgoing a right that is mine? – Obviously no one can attack you for that. Obviously in America you can use this right as you do all the others, but it's another question if that's a valid excuse before God if you neglect this for no good reason. And that is why I am confronting you with this. This leads me to my **seventh reason**, which is this: **"We have no right, without need, to forego a right that God has extended to us."** God knows what is best, what is salutary for us. But his wisdom has made the whole church responsible for the Keys to the kingdom of heaven and for the whole administration of the church. He has done this to save us. Now would we be allowed to throw such gifts away? Never. God will not have his gifts despised. Everything that destroys souls, that arises from our sinfully squandering our ecclesial freedom and the full exercise of our congregational rights, is our responsibility and we will someday have to give an account for it before God.

Now just this point is so important that I will pause here, since I have certainly only touched and hinted at the essentials of this matter that deserves much discussion. I am firmly convinced that

all must agree in this without expending many more words. Our experience speaks too mightily here to our hearts for us to withstand the power of this evidence. I therefore appeal to you just once more: Be warned, dear brothers, open your eyes and learn what Satan has in mind to do against us.

Yet I cannot stop there. So just lend me an open ear for a moment. My **eighth reason** for the responsibility of all to take part in the assembly is: "**Because in God's Word we are warned numerous times against any separation from our brothers.**"

This is clearly presented in Heb. 10.24-25, which says this: "Let us encourage one another, inciting one another to love and good works, and not forsaking the assembly, as some are in the habit of doing, but rather admonishing one another." Obviously this isn't here referring merely to assemblies where only the preacher delivers the Word, but where everyone is free to speak, to admonish, to rebuke and to counsel, as we have read of the various assemblies of the congregations in the apostolic age. Now they came together not only to edify each other, as noted above, but to consider and deal with conflicts in doctrine and other matters, to establish external orders, to arrange for collections of alms, to appoint and send ordained men to other congregations, to make investigations concerning people who were accused, as it is accounted to us in the 21<sup>st</sup> Chapter of the Acts.: As St. Paul first came to Jerusalem and then told James what great things God had done for him amongst the Gentiles, James then stated that in this congregation, composed almost entirely of converted Jews, Paul had come under the suspicion that he had completely rejected Moses. After saying this James therefore said: "What should we do now? By all means the whole assembly must gather, for they have become aware of your arrival." It goes on to say in 1 Tim. 5.20: "Rebuke those who sin there before everyone so that the others also fear." From all this we see how many various assemblies there were, all of which the writer to the Hebrews refers to by saying: "Let us not forsake our assembly as some are accustomed to do." But we also hear how the Christians were eager to assemble while the fire of their first love was burning in their hearts. For it says in Acts 2: "And they gathered daily and constantly with each other with one mind in the temple – and praised God with joyous, simple hearts." Many meetings were not a burden to the first Christians. They sought first the kingdom of God, they most loved the glory of God, and they sought their joy in Christian fellowship, so they set their desire on what might seem to others to be burdensome. O that something like that might occur among us! But many here fall far short of this. Let us therefore bear in mind what evil consequences must result from separating from the fellowship, even if it only consists of those various sorts of meetings mentioned above. O, all too easily a greater schism develops even when an apparently insignificant and innocent one is allowed to occur. Someone skips the meetings. Others see it. At first it's excused, but finally all sorts of suspicious conjectures are made if, by being away, he no longer cares about the congregation. So they also lose their trust in him, as people have been filled with mistrust for him because he has not publicly excused himself. And thus, by and by, a division, an alienation of hearts arises, incited by the devil, out of a small, insignificant separation. The one absenting himself from the assembly notices people acting suspiciously towards him because of it. This makes him uncomfortable and he withdraws even more, and behold, out of an apparently very insignificant matter a great ruinous rift is caused. – Another thing that is most significant is that many fellow members who have recently joined would always remain strangers because they do not attend the assembly. That frequent avoidance of the meetings promotes disunity in the judgement of the congregation members over important situations being discussed there. But above all, the mark of a true Christian

congregation is that they are bound in brotherly love and, above all, that they are one in faith and confession. That's why St. Paul says in 1 Cor. 1: "I admonish all of you, brothers, by the Name of our LORD, JESUS Christ, that you speak the same as one another and let no division be among you, but hold fast to one another in one mind, and in the same judgement." But how could we better follow this admonition than by eagerly gathering and expressing our differences there, so we finally unite with each other in one mind?

So here I'm running out of time. The last, that is, the **ninth reason** I must present to you is this: "**Because your brother is offended by such drawing back.** So even if one individual or another would bear no fruit by bringing his thoughts into the assembly, yet everyone should let himself be encouraged to attend by remembering how his example will lead others to do the same. The results of the same have already been explicitly shown. Don't think that's a small thing. Worldly thinking is all too powerfully getting the upper hand among us. Conformity with the world is already powerfully taking the field against our congregation. Therefore more and more will forsake our assembly for no good reason, and by doing so they will unintentionally be seen as leaders by those who, out of pure selfishness, won't even break from the world a few hours or might not want to be associated with us for fear of men or to please men.

But before I bring this to a conclusion it's necessary yet to dispose of two objections that might be raised against what I've said.

Perhaps many might say it would be dangerous to make this a matter of conscience and to make this a law. This is how I respond to that. This presentation does not make this a matter of conscience for anyone. God himself has done this, since he has given the law to love one's neighbor and he has commanded each individual to act on behalf of the whole. I am doing nothing more than to remind each Christian's conscience of that ancient duty God had demanded long ago. You certainly would not want to sin against God and his holy Word by summarily and completely dismissing every divine admonition by saying of it: I won't allow that to be made a matter of conscience. Instead of making such a hasty statement first let one take every Word of God before him and, by that, test everything, and whatever agrees with it submit to it without consulting with flesh and blood or seeking unfounded excuses from the flesh. – Yet if some might worry that a legalistic compulsion might be made out of this obligation of love, I thoroughly agree with that concern. That should and may not be permitted to happen, as little here as with attendance at public worship. So if anyone at times has a substantial reason not to attend the assembly he ought not make this a matter of conscience. Then he should remain at home in God's Name and not be concerned if others, judging with a plank in their own eye, see his splinter. Each one stands or falls by his LORD. Each must know how best to use his freedom or not. Obviously, no one should or is permitted to neglect his earthly calling to attend the congregation's meeting.

Now just one more thing! Apparently a number of congregational members may be less prone to attend the assembly, I think, because the meetings don't go as smoothly as they might wish. Often people say: "Why should I go? Nothing goes on there but arguments and contentions." – To this I reply: First, that's not completely true. To be fair, it must also be conceded that it often proceeds in a very Christian and edifying way. Yet even if we must admit, at the same time, that in conflict with others very destructive, very bitter arguments, often based only on reason, and many useless words are spoken, yet I still say: When those who see the harm being done stay away, the matter is not helped and counseled but, rather, it only makes things

worse. If the cart is stuck in a bog and the house is already beset in a consuming fire, what good does it do to run away from it? It's then most important to rally and grab hold of the situation! So you people who see this destruction, bravely arise, rebuke what is by nature godless, and stand at the side of all who are well intended. "Yeah," you say, "It won't change anything." O, just don't give up. David cries out to us: "Right must still remain right, and all pious hearts will agree." So only be patient and do not give up admonishing, rebuking, speaking, so your witness will not remain without a blessing. But if others won't listen at all, then the blessing would not remain there but return to you. "Yeah," another is saying, "that's just what keeps me away. I get no blessing in the assembly but rather just more disappointment, confusion, conflict and the like." But please know, if you have this complaint, that others confess just the opposite and have even gleaned much benefit from the assembly. Could it be that you yourself might be to blame for robbing yourself of this blessing? For have you, perhaps, falsely only been regarding as a blessing what does not upset your heart, but only what brings forth and maintains a sweet, quiet peace and pleasant feelings and emotions? But surely, you err in that. You can have blessing even while you're reaction is discomfort and even being filled with worry, consternation and care. For only through observing those terrible situations of the congregation with your own eye can you then become moved to engage in heart-felt intercession for her, which is already of great use. But besides that, the lack of your own usefulness does not in any way relieve you of your duty to help your neighbor. Even here it says: "Obedience is better than sacrifice." If you are finding it useless to give your opinion to tax collectors and sinners, then you must try all that much harder to do so.

But, finally, some might also complain our meetings are too frequent. Too much time is spent on them. My reply is this: If meetings were better attended and if a stricter watch were kept on things, there would be much less useless talk and dissension and, in short order, we would then have less discussion and arrive more quickly at our goals.

May our gracious God also bear with me and, of his grace, grant me my sincere goal in this, that our assembly not only be better attended but also become more fruitful for the health of our congregation. For this, may he rule our hearts for the sake of JESUS Christ, our precious Savior. Amen.