

John Piper on Hebrews 10:24-25

As I said in the body of this work, Hebrews 10:24-25 is key. This chapter comprises my brief comments on three sermons which John Piper preached on the passage, sermons in which he made (though not always strongly enough) a valuable contribution to this discussion.

I start with a sermon Piper preached in 1997, in which he spoke of the command for believers to ‘get together and encourage one another’. Piper:

Two things. *First*, don’t neglect to get together. *Second*, encourage one another.

Sadly, Piper then broke into ‘Christendom-speak’:

When I was growing up I heard this text referred to most often as an argument for regular attendance at worship services. ‘Do not forsake the assembling of yourselves together – come to church regularly’. And that is not a wrong application of the text.

Is it not? The New Testament knows nothing of it.

Piper went on – but rather weakly – to speak of the importance of preaching. The gospel not only (as he put it) ‘begs’ to be preached, but believers are commanded in countless scriptural passages to preach it; not only that, we are given many examples of men doing it.

Piper:

One of the most important kinds of encouragements and exhortations that we get is from the preaching of God’s word in the power of God’s Spirit... But in the context [of Hebrews 10:24-25], the kind of coming together in view seems to be [it is! – DG] one where the members ‘encourage one another’. Verse 25 is explicit: come together and encourage one another. The ‘one another’ implies [makes it clear! – DG] that there is something mutual going on; one is encouraging another, and another is

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encouraging one; each is doing or saying something that encourages [others].

Piper then had to deal with the large numbers attending his own ministry:

If you ask what that corresponds to in our church, I would say the closest thing is the small groups – which is why I regard this [small-group] ministry as so utterly crucial. I am a great believer in preaching. There is something about the word of God that begs [see above – DG] to be heralded and trumpeted and exulted over – as well as discussed and taught. But I have no illusions that preaching is enough in the life of a believer. The New Testament – and especially this book of Hebrews – calls us again and again to a kind of mutual ministry that involves all the believers in encouraging others.

Spot on! Piper was making a most important point. He had ‘no illusions that preaching is enough’. The fact is, a monologue is not the best way of edifying the saints; most believers are no further on in this respect after twenty years of it.¹ Elders should be doing themselves out of a job; that is, according to Ephesians 4:7-16, they should be nurturing believers to be able to edify themselves and each other.²

Piper went on, urging his listeners (readers) to get back to Scripture, back to the new covenant, and not cling to tradition:

God is calling you, through this word [that is, Hebrews 10:24-25], to break a habit of non-participation, and to strengthen a habit of participation in small-group togetherness where you encourage each other. It’s not the only way to stimulate others to love and good deeds, but it’s the way emphasised in this text.

¹ See my *Sowed*. Research has shown that though millions watch and enjoy a weather forecast, when asked about it afterwards, 70% cannot recall what they heard about the expected weather. Monologues delivered in ‘church services’ are not exempt. Indeed, I suspect the recall rate would be far less than 70%.

² See my *Pastor*.

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Yes, the forming of small groups within a large church is often the way those who appreciate the teaching of the new covenant try to cope with the institutional. But the New Testament does not warrant small groups within large churches; rather, it speaks of small churches, full stop! This is the only way the *ekklēsia* can function as it should. We have got this upside down. Small meetings – separate, small churches – are the new-covenant norm; large gatherings should be regarded as the exception. Contemporary practice encourages the appalling notion of ‘a church within a church’.³

In another sermon on Hebrews 10:24-25, which Piper preached in 2005, he spoke of ‘the aim of one-another ministry’:

Under the overarching goal of glorifying God, the aim of one-another ministry in the church is sustaining and strengthening faith in Christ [among fellow-believers – DG]. And through that faith the aim is negatively to avoid sin, and positively to love people. Hebrews 3:1-13 puts the emphasis on the negative, and Hebrews 10:24-25 puts the emphasis on the positive...

So I appeal to you as one of your under-shepherds – don’t be a loner in the Christian life. God did not make you to be that way... ‘Do not neglect to meet together... but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the day [of judgment] drawing near’.

Piper returned to the passage in a third sermon in 2007, in which he spoke of ‘the essential place of smaller gatherings’, but, alas, yet again he had to cope with the institutional church for which he was responsible. In particular, he spoke of how the:

...care that the elders give happens in part through the small gatherings of believers where they can help each other hold fast to their hope and stay strong in the Lord.

³ See my *Battle*.

He went on to list four benefits of the smaller gathering. In the main, he was excellent:

1. We encourage one another... God's plan for our good is that much of our encouragement comes from other Christians speaking the word of God into our lives and praying for us.
2. We stir up one another to love and good works... God's purpose is that this mutual encouragement functions to stir us up to love and good works... We encourage each other, and we stir each other up to love...
3. We *gather*... to do this encouraging and this stirring up to love and good works...⁴ It is the kind of gathering where the pattern of ministry is each person ministering to the others... 'not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, *but encouraging one another*'. The meeting, in this case, is the kind of meeting that necessarily implies encouraging one another. So God is telling us that it is good for us to gather in smaller groups and minister to each other. This is his way of caring for us. He calls elders to oversee this, but it is the smaller, one-another ministry of all the members that completes the shepherding work.
4. Especially as the end approaches... Notice that this kind of gathering in smaller groups to encourage each other is increasingly urgent as the end of the times draws near... 'and all the more as you see the day [of judgment] drawing near'... 'In the last days there will come times of difficulty' (2 Tim. 3:1)... times of stress and tremendous pressure and hardship and darkness and evil. It will not get easier to be a Christian. And God is telling us what we will need to do to hold fast to our confession of hope (Heb. 10:23): Meet. Meet. Meet. And encourage one another. And stir each other up to love. Lone-ranger Christians will drop like flies in these days.⁵

I would like to make some comments.

⁴ I have omitted Piper's words on how a church with a large attendance tries to cope with it: 'This meeting together is not merely the big gathering for corporate worship, as we do on Sunday mornings'.

⁵ Original 'those days'. The writer to the Hebrews was referring to this entire age.

The point the writer to the Hebrews was making is true not only for ‘lone-ranger Christians’. I have learned by experience that one can be more lonely in a crowd, not least ‘in church’, than when one is alone.

Moreover, silent, passive Christians, though they ‘go to church’ and find themselves in a crowd, nevertheless remain vulnerable.

Again, people do not learn by merely absorbing facts, delivered by a man giving them a monologue; they learn best what they try to teach others, and in their own words.⁶ Indeed, until we can explain truth in our own words, we do not really understand it.

Then again, and of the utmost importance, as can be seen, in these discourses Piper was, in effect, making the case for the new-covenant *ekklēsia* – relatively small numbers of saints engaging in the ministry of the priesthood of all believers under the principle of members of the body of Christ, in order to encourage, stiffen, put backbone into each other. The institutional, large-size church gets nowhere near it. Moreover, as I have already noted, small groups within a church encourage the notion of ‘a church within a church’.

Furthermore, ‘those days’ do not lie in the future; they are here and now, as they have been throughout the age. This is ‘the end time’; it has been ‘the end time’ since Pentecost (Acts 2:17; 1 Tim. 4:1; 2 Tim. 3:1; 4:3; Heb. 1:2; Jas. 5:3; 2 Pet. 3:3; Jude 18).⁷

⁶ See my *Sowed; Pastor; The Priesthood*.

⁷ Some of these references may have a more local meaning.