

The Glory of Gathering: Corporate Worship

Hebrews 10:24-25

Intro: Weird is Normal

It can be an interesting exercise to occasionally step back and reflect upon some of the normal things we do in life that are actually quite odd. They don't feel odd because they're so familiar and maybe even necessary, but when you actually think about them, it really is weird.

Like, eating. We need to eat to live. But have you ever thought about how strange eating is? You're taking a substance outside of you and you actually put it in a hole in your face that chomps that substance with the hard things that are inside that whole. And then you force that substance down a deeper hole that eventually makes its way out again. It's a little weird. (I know that was a very scientific way of describing eating!)

Sometimes we can become so familiar with things we do, that are perhaps necessary for our flourishing, but we forget how strange they are. What we do here every Sunday is really weird.

You actually ***set an alarm*** to wake up early enough to prepare yourself to ***be somewhat presentable***, to come to an ***old building*** that needs a lot of work. And ***drink amazing coffee*** (maybe that's why you come) and participate in a ***meeting*** that includes you actually having to ***sing*** (along with everyone else) and many of you are not singers, yet you still do it!

You ***read from a book*** that is centuries old. You ***listen*** to someone from the front ***talk to*** a Being whom we can't see. You watch someone stand in ***waist-deep water***, ***dunk*** another person in that water. You ***listen*** to one guy get up in front who opens that centuries old book and talks for like 45 mins(!!!) about a few lines from that book, and he tells you that you need to obey what is said here and you actually believe him.

And then, to close out this strange meeting, everyone together, in unison, ***eats crackers*** and ***drinks juice***. When we step back and consider what we actually do every Sunday, we must admit, it's a little odd.

BUT, when we understand what is behind every facet of what we do, we know, it's not odd...it is glorious! What IS behind all of these seemingly odd practices? What's behind them is a message that is the best news in the world: the Gospel! If you don't know the gospel and your heart has not been transformed by the gospel, then this stuff is bonkers!

But when you know the **[GOSPEL]**...When you every aspect of our worship gathering is fueled by and points to THAT: our singing, praying, reading about this good news in the Bible, the preaching, baptism, and yes... eating crackers and drinking juice...what we do here is not odd; it is glorious.

Gather to Grow in Grace

I've entitled this series, "The Dearest Place on Earth: Experiencing the Beauty and Glory of the Church." And for this last sermon, I wanna spend time reflecting on the main weekly gathering of the church. We'll camp out for a bit in Heb. 10:24-25. Then I want us to reflect on the five key elements of a worship gathering to show

just how odd and glorious they are, SO THAT we'll WANT to obey Heb 10:24-25.

Here's what's going on in the context of this passage: chapters 7-10 are all about the sufficient priestly work of Christ. He is a greater priest than the OC priests because his ministry is based on a new and better covenant. He is a priest who didn't have to keep offering sacrifices of goats and bulls, which could never take away sins, but he offered himself ONCE and FOR ALL! Notice how he summarizes the point he's been making in the last few chapters in **[10:19-21]**

Since Jesus did it all and since he is our great High Priest, and since we have confidence in him...WHAT? What implications does the writer of Hebrews make? 3 of them. 1) **[v22]**. 2) **[v23]**. The first two are about our personal relationship with God, but the third goes outward. 3) **[v24]**

I want us to focus our attention on that third point. Here's the argument: *In light of what Jesus has done, we must help other church members grow in grace.* How? Four words: *Think. Meet. Encourage. Anticipate.*

1) Think. What's the main verb in v24? We might be tempted to say, "STIR up one another." And that is the thrust of this verse. We should STIR each other up towards love and good works. In fact, "stir up" is a very strong word. It is the same word used negatively to describe the "sharp" disagreement that took place between Paul and Barnabas in Acts 15:39 that led them to part ways in their missionary efforts. There was a "sharp" dispute.

But this passage uses the word positively: "Stir up!" Create a kind of good friction that compels people to action. *Like, think of a boy scout who builds his own fire. He gathers the sticks and leaves, and then he creates friction with a stick or rocks that then sparks a fire.*

"Stir up one another towards love and good works." We have a responsibility for that! We are not just responsible to pursue love and good works for ourselves! We are responsible to stir it up in others. So often we reduce the Christian responsibility to "ME pursuing love and good works," but we are responsible to help others!

HOWEVER, did you notice the main verb in this verse? He's not telling us *merely* to stir up one another. He's telling us to "CONSIDER" how to do this. **[v24]** THINK about it! REFLECT on it. Be deliberate in stirring one another up.

It doesn't just happen. You don't just come to church just hoping it'll happen, or worse, not even thinking about it. We should be thinking and praying on our way to church, as we get ready in the morning, even throughout the week, "How can I encourage that sister to follow Christ more faithfully? How can I push that brother to love others in the body more tangibly?" THINK/CONSIDER.

2) Meet. [v25a] I appreciate his qualification. He's warning against a habit—getting comfortable not gathering with God's people. He's talking about the Sunday worship gathering. He's talking to a church—not a Bible study, not some students on their dorm floor—this is a church. Don't neglect gathering with your church for worship. How else are you gonna stir others up if we don't see one another?

I hope you see why “online/virtual church” is an oxymoron. The word “church” itself means “assembly.” You can’t be a church if you don’t assemble together. And if the sum of “church” for us is just getting things that we can get from watching a screen, we’re missing the whole point of church!

Don’t neglect meeting together! Do you know why some members of this church—to whom the writer of Hebrews is addressing—were tempted NOT to gather? One person said, “The fear of discrimination and persecution explains...why some believers were inclined to abandon their meetings.” (Schreiner, 321) In other words, they were tempted NOT to come to church because they didn’t want to go to jail or possibly get killed.

Oh how different many Christians are in 21st century America. “But my kids have baseball on Sunday mornings. But Sundays are one of my only days off. And what about football? My NFL team! Gotta keep up with my fantasy football!” The original audience of this letter was tempted to neglect church for what we might think would

be legitimate reasons—like, “I don’t wanna die!” And yet, the writer of Hebrews still says, “Don’t miss out on church!” WHY? One person said: “Refusing to meet with other believers in [that] context signifie[d] apostasy, the renunciation of the Christian faith. If believers renounce meeting with other Christians, especially because they fear discrimination and mistreatment, they are in effect turning against Christ.” (Schreiner, 321)

Do you get that? If they’re seeking to avoid persecution for their faith in Christ by not gathering for worship, then that was a sign of possible apostasy—that they’re walking away from Christ!

Of course, we don’t wanna be legalistic here. There are, no doubt, circumstances that prevent some of us from gathering. Our homebound members WANT to be here, but they can’t because health prevents them. That’s not who the writer of Hebrews is addressing. But don’t let exceptions keep us from feeling the weightiness of this exhortation. Gathering is vital! For what purpose?

3) Encourage. [v25b]

We can't do that if we're not together, at least not to the degree that is necessary. A *massive* part of what we do here is to encourage one another. Encouraging each other to keep walking with Christ and fighting sin and loving Jesus. Why?

4) Anticipate. [v25c]

We're anticipating the second coming. We must feel the urgency to gather weekly for worship because Jesus is coming soon! And we're all gonna have to stand before him! That's why he goes on to say in **[vv26-27]**.

Do you see his point? Gathering for worship with God's people to encourage one another is NOT OPTIONAL! It is VITAL for our perseverance in the faith as we await Jesus' return.

The Elements of a Glorious Gathering

Now, I wanna ask: WHAT do we do when we gather? The Bible presents us with five elements: Read, sing, pray, observe ordinances, preach. I wanna unpack each of those briefly, but before we do, let's ask: Why do we ONLY do those things? Why not express our worship to

God through *painting*? We could set up painting stations around this room and set aside some time for all of us to express worship to God in that way. Why don't we? (All the parents of young children are saying, "I think it's obvious. Unless you want paint all over the floors and walls, it's prob not a good idea!")

But do we just not do those things for practical reasons? What about dancing? What about skits and dramas? Why only these things? Here's the reason: *We have the conviction that God has already told us HOW he wants to be worshiped.*

And so, we want to strive to do what he *commands* us to do. And we do not want to bind the consciences of anyone beyond Scripture, such that no Christian can object to what we're doing and this should be sufficient for every Christian.

Five elements of a worship gathering; we'll look at the biblical support for each and then talk about how glorious each is.

1) Reading [1 Tim. 4:13, pg933]

The book of 1 Timothy was written by the apostle Paul to his son in the faith, Timothy. Paul sent Timothy to the church in the city of Ephesus in order to help the congregation understand how to do church. This is a letter about how to do church. **[3:14-15]**

And so, if the primary purpose of 1 Timothy is to teach the church how to conduct themselves in the household of God, then we would do well to pay attention to what Paul tells Timothy to prioritize. Notice the language in **[1 Tim. 4:13, “devote”]**

The word “devote” is the same word Paul uses to describe a characteristic of deacons in 3:8—“they must not be ADDICTED to much wine.” Addicted—same word. “Until I come, DEVOTE yourself (be addicted) to reading Scripture.”

This was one of Timothy’s main assignments. “READ THE BIBLE PUBLICLY, Timothy. Make this a top priority.” Why? Paul tells Timothy in his second letter to him: 2 Tim. 3:16, “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching,

for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.”

Scripture is what we need for our lives, church! It is sufficient to give us what we need to know on how to live lives of godliness and to be equipped for every good work. Paul did not say, “Timothy, devote yourself to the public reading of the *latest cultural commentator*. Devote yourself to the public reading of *inspiring poetry* or *the newspaper*.” No, he said, “Devote yourself to the public reading of the BIBLE!”

Oh church, don’t minimize how glorious it is to hear the Bible read every Sunday in your own language. Do you realize how glorious this is? The Bible is the very Word of God to us. Therefore, when it is read publicly, GOD IS SPEAKING! So don’t tune out! God is speaking!

2) *Praying* [1 Tim. 2:1-4, pg931]

Remember this letter was written about how one ought to behave in the household of God, the church. So Paul is saying that prayers must be made in the church gathering. And notice

who Paul says we should pray for! “Kings and all who are in high places.” There’s a reason why we pray for government officials, during the pastoral prayer, whether we voted for them or not! That’s irrelevant! We’re called to pray for them.

Do you realize how glorious it is to pray together as a church? We get to talk to God! Immediate, instant access to him. How? **[vv5-6]**

That’s why we get to talk to God. That’s why we can come to him with our troubles, our wants, our needs, our longings, our joys, our sorrows. We come directly to him because Jesus opened the way for us.

3) *Singing* [Eph. 5:18-19, pg.919]

Notice the direction of our singing...we are to address ONE ANOTHER in song. That’s weird! Do you do that? Y’all looking at each other when you sing? Some of you try to purposefully NOT look at each other!

What does he mean by this? I think the point is that our singing ought to be distinctly corporate.

It's meant to be a one-anothering. Your singing is not just for you. It's for others! We should hear each other's voices. When we sing in corporate worship, we are not only singing to God. That's not what makes our singing distinct. You can sing to God at home by yourself.

The main sounds we should hear in the singing part of the worship gathering are the voices of the congregation. I hope you realize how glorious it is to worship God TOGETHER through singing. There is something about worshipping God together that can't be done merely through speaking. The gospel is too glorious for us just to talk about it. We gotta sing it! And we gotta do it together! (We'll have the opportunity at the end of the service!)

4) Observing Ordinances

There are two ordinances Jesus gave us to practice: the Lord's Supper and baptism. We're doing both today! And you can't tell me after watching that baptism earlier that it's not glorious! **[Acts 2:37-41, p856]**

Notice the order: they received the word THEN they were baptized, and then they were

added...to WHAT? The church! This is the formation of the first church. The order is faith, baptism, and then church membership. Why that order? The rest of the NT indicates that it's because baptism is a picture of our faith. It's a picture of what happened to us when we got saved—our old self died, and we've been raised to walk in the newness of life.

Do you realize how glorious this is? Jesus would have commanded that the outward sign of our union with Christ be sprinkling or high-fiving or whatever. But to be plunged under the water and to be forcefully brought back up, gloriously and uniquely pictures our salvation in such a beautiful and dramatic way! We're alive! The old person who used to love sin and self is dead, and now we're new! Because of Jesus, we're new/alive!

Consider the ***Lord's Supper***. [1 Cor. 11:17-22, pg901] Bad situation. But notice that language "when you come together as a church." What's that talking about? Corporate worship. The Sunday gathering. And when did they observe the Lord's supper? When they came together!

There's a reason why we observe this every Sunday. It seems evident it was the pattern of the NT. And what's the purpose? [**vv23-26**]

There is a kind of proclamation of the gospel—the death of Jesus—when we partake of the Lord's Supper together. We do it to remember the work of Christ in our place. / ***hope you see how glorious it is!*** Jesus purposefully instituted this practice in order for us to SEE the gospel displayed. It's a visual, tangible illustration of the gospel. But it's more than just SEEING. You ever wonder why we eat and drink? It's meant to be a kind of nourishing practice. It shows us that we are spiritually nourished as we reflect upon the work of Christ in our place.

And the whole point of 1 Cor. 11 is that we do this *together*! We come to the table together as a sign of our unity in the gospel. If baptism is that initial sign of our entrance INTO God's family, the Lord's Supper is that ongoing sign that we're PART OF the family.

5) Preaching

There's a reason I've saved this one for last. I want to argue that, though preaching is not sufficient for the health of a church, it is central to the health of a church. In other words, it is the center of the church's health. You can have the best singing, the most fervent praying, lots of reading, but if you have unfaithful preaching, the church CANNOT be healthy. Every other aspect of the church flows from the centrality of the preached word to the church. Lemme show you ***how seriously Paul*** takes the preached word. [2 Tim 4:1-2a, pg936]

What a way of commanding Timothy to preach. He could've just said, "Timothy, you gotta preach the Word. It's so important. It's what changes lives. Do it!" But he adds so much more weight to the command.

- ***"I charge you..."*** NOT, "I'm *suggesting* this as a good option." NOT, "I'm encouraging you to consider this." No... "I CHARGE you...I'm *telling/ exhorting/ commanding* you... You gotta do this, Timothy!"
- ***"In the presence of God..."*** "You've got an audience! God himself is listening. Don't get

up there and tell funny jokes and cute stories, Timothy. Don't get up there and talk about your opinions. God is watching."

- And "***In the presence...of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and dead.***" "The one to whom every human being will have to give an account for how they lived is listening to YOU preach, Timothy. You're doing it in his presence. So you BETTER give a message that will tell the people how they can be right with the Judge of all the earth!"
- And you're doing this in light of the fact that this judge is coming again—"by his ***appearing.***" "He really is coming back, Timothy, and these people whom you're preaching to are going to stand before him face to face!"
- And he will establish his "***kingdom,***" as Paul says. A kingdom IN which they will be OR NOT forever.

[4:1] All that to set up these three words: "Preach the Word." Do you see why we take preaching so seriously here? Do you see why we spend so much time working through books of the Bible, passage-by-passage, verse-by-verse.

The preaching event on Sunday mornings is weighty and glorious. Think of what's happening in the preaching event on Sunday mornings. The whole church is gathered at once to listen to one voice. That doesn't happen in any other aspect of the life of the church. Discipleship meetings, small groups, evangelism, Bible studies...Preaching is the one event in the life of the church where the whole church gathers at once to hear from God.

Why would we waste our time listening to the opinions of man? That's why it's so important for the man standing in the pulpit to get it right! I heard one person say, "Pastors can preach the Bible in such a way that silences the voice of God." There's a lot of "Bible" preaching out there that is not actual Bible preaching. The Bible serves more as a springboard to talk about what the pastor wants to talk about.

"Preach the word." Do you get yourself ready for this? Do you read the sermon passage ahead of time to prepare your heart and whet your appetite? Do you pray for your heart and other's hearts that they will hear and receive the Word?

Conclusion

What we do on Sunday mornings—reading, praying, singing, baptizing, Lord's Supper, and preaching—let's admit, it's a little weird! But it is gloriously weird!! It's weird if our hearts are not in love with God. It's weird if our hearts have not been changed by the gospel. It can be weird if we have no intimate connection to the people around us.

But if you love God because you know how much he loves you through Jesus, and you love all of these other people whom Jesus brought into his family, then you'll take the charge from Hebrews 10:25, "...don't neglect meeting together," and you'll say, "Why would I want to???"

Church, what we do here is odd but SO GLORIOUS! Let us give ourselves to it and help one another do the same.