

A shepherd with a flock of sheep in a mountainous landscape. The shepherd is on the left, holding a staff, looking towards the sheep. The sheep are in the foreground, and the background features rolling hills and mountains under a cloudy sky. The entire image has a warm, golden-brown color overlay.

# WHY WE GATHER

# Introduction

In this age of individualism, social media and livestreamed church services, it can be tempting to think that coming together as a church isn't really all that important.

Of course, there are also some poor reasons for "going to church". People might come along out of a sense of duty, ticking off one of their religious duties of the week. Some might come because of the shame or guilt they might feel if they don't. Some come along to subtly bargain God into blessing them. Others come because it's just what they've always done. These are lifeless reasons to walk through the doors of a church building on a Sunday morning.

So, why do we gather? Why, for the last 2000 years, Sunday after Sunday, does the church continue to meet together? And those meetings in the middle of the week too; why have those? Why turn up to those?

In this short booklet we explore 9 biblical reasons why we gather. We hope they will motivate you to gather with God's people. And if you already gather with God's people, we hope these might give you deeper and richer reasons for gathering.

# It's Who We Are

# 1

*Ecclesia* is the Greek word translated 'church' in our Bibles. *Ecclesia* comes from two words; *ek* (out of) and *kaleo* (to call). Here's a helpful definition: a gathering of citizens called out from their homes to gather in some public place.

- Gatherings gather. Assemblies assemble.
- A gathering can't be a gathering without gathering. An assembly can't be an assembly without assembling.

Not every *ecclesia* was a gathering of Christians. The New Testament calls the gathering of Christians "the church [*ecclesia*] of God"; the gathering of God. When we trusted Christ as Saviour we became part of his church; his gathering of people, his called-out assembly.

The New Testament gives us some rich pictures of Jesus' church:

- the body - a collection of different parts all brought together as a whole
- a temple - each believer is a stone making up a beautiful building
- a household - a loving family of people who gather to share and serve

Each of these pictures, and others, imply that the people of Christ gather together as a community.

In the New Testament a church is never a building or a place, but the actual gathering of people itself. This is why we often use language like 'gathering as the church' instead of 'going to church'.

So the first reason we gather is because that is who we are; we are a gathering, an assembly, a called out people.

# It's What Christ Died For

## 2

Jesus told his followers "I will build my church". This is why he came. To build a new called out gathering of a new humanity.

Psalm 22 is an amazing prophecy of the death of Jesus 1000 years before it happened. Verse 1-21 describe, in vivid detail, crucifixion from the experience of the one being crucified. It's often called the fifth account of the crucifixion of Christ. Once we get into verse 22 the atmosphere changes. Suddenly there is a note of victory and deliverance. The one being crucified cries out "I will declare your name to my people; in the assembly I will praise you".

Jesus' death and resurrection leads to him surrounded by a gathering of people, praising his Father. This is what he came for; to be the faithful head of a faithful house. To be the centre of a gathering who gather to praise the Father.

Ephesians 5v25 tells us that "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her". In Acts 20v25 Paul calls the church leaders to "be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood."

Yes, Jesus died for individuals. But he also died so that those individuals would, together, become a part of the New Creation he has brought and is bringing into this world.

Ephesians 2v11-22 tells us that the death of Christ means Jews and Gentiles, who trust in him, are brought into one body, one family, one spiritual temple. Other passages tell us that the death of Jesus means that slaves and free, men and women, rich and poor, civilised and uncivilised, weak and powerful, educated and uneducated, are all made one in Christ. Ephesians 1v10 tells us that everything will ultimately be brought into unity one day in Jesus.

So we gather because Jesus came and died to found a new gathering in his name, and we get to be a part of this historic and eternal gathering!

## It's What God Commands

## 3

Gathering with our church family is a voluntary act of joyful obedience and commitment to God. We don't obey God out of servile fear, but rather out of joyful, grace-fuelled love and gratitude for all that he is to us and has done for us in Jesus.

The Spirit of God has inspired the Bible. This means the commands we read for Christians are inspired by the Spirit. This means they are the will of God for us.

The author of Hebrews in 10v25, inspired by the Spirit of God, writes that believers should "not neglect to meet together". The word 'meet' here means to gather or assemble together. The word 'neglect' means to leave behind, abandon, forsake.

John tells us in 1 John 5:3 "this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome". What God commands us is not intended to weigh us down. God's commands to his people are good gifts of life to us. God knows what we need, he knows what is good and best for us.

Because our hearts are full of the God who loved us, because we trust his love and care for us, because the Spirit is living in us to help us do what God calls us to do, we can obey this command of his to not neglect the gatherings of his people; our church family.

So we gather, in loving obedience to God.

# It's the Early Church Model

## 4

The church was born on the day of Pentecost, around 2000 years ago. The day began with the people of Christ gathered together (Acts 2v1).

As more people trusted in Jesus, they continued to gather together (Acts 2v41-47).

*...there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers...and day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes...*

We see the early church gathering at the temple for daily prayer in the name of Jesus and gathering together from house to house to learn, pray, eat and fellowship.

This practice of regular gathering continued. Acts 20v7 shows us that it was the custom of the church to gather together on the first day of the week. Paul also assumes this custom in 1 Corinthians 16v2.

From other New Testament passages we can see that the Christians had some level of mutual engagement with one another on a daily or near daily basis:

- *And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus. (Acts 5v42)*
- *Their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. (Acts 6v1)*
- *Reasoning daily in the hall of Tyrannus. (Acts 19v9)*
- *Exhort one another every day (Hebrews 3v13)*

As we move out of the first generation of Christians we can see this custom of regular gathering continue. Justin Martyr, in his First Apology (1:67), around 150AD, writes:

*"And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place...Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because...Jesus Christ our Saviour on the same day rose from the dead."*

This custom of regularly gathering as the gathering, assembling as the assembly, has continued for 2000 years.

So we gather together with our brothers and sisters of our local church, because we are continuing a beautiful two millennia tradition.

# It's What We Need

## 5

Any careful reading of the New Testament will tell you that gathering is who we are and what we do, because it's what we need.

In Colossians 2v2 Paul longs for the believers to be deeply united together in love for Christ and for one another, so that they will grow in their understating of all they have in Christ. Apparently it's only as we are a loving, united gathering of people that this depth of understanding will come.

*...being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ...*

According to Hebrews 3v13 I need daily exhortation from my brothers and sisters, so that my heart isn't hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

*But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.*

Hebrews 10v24-25 tells me that I need my brothers and sisters to stir me up to love and good works.

*Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together...*

Ephesians 4v15-16 describes the church as a body, growing in love, as each part of the body does its share in building up each other part of the body.

*Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.*

I need this. I need the gathering. I need the comfort, the encouragement, the exhortation, the reminders, the wisdom, the perspective, the support of God's people. I need the hymns we sing, I need them to reset my heart and mind and draw me out of the small confines of my little kingdom of self. I need to hear the prayers. I need the reading and preaching of his word. I need the fellowship before and after.

So we gather because we need the gathering.

# It Blesses Our Church Family

## 6

As I sat at the back of the gathering last Sunday morning I looked around to see my brothers and sisters singing with me. I watched as;

- veterans of the faith praised God for his goodness throughout their lives.
- new believers celebrated that they had received the mercy of God.
- those struggling with sin sang of victory over sin and a future without sin.
- grievors and sufferers praised God as their loving, caring, wise Father.

Watching my family in Christ sing with meaning filled my heart and ministered to me in rich, beautiful ways.

Before and after the service, as I spoke to and fellowshiped with my brothers and sisters:

- I watched mature believers work to restore repenting believers.
- I watched sufferers pray for each other in their suffering.
- I watched as guests were loved, embraced and pointed to Jesus.
- I watched people, who have nothing in common with one another, except Jesus, laugh and pray and share the things of life together.

If it is true that I need the gathering of God's people, then it is also true that my brothers and sisters in Christ need it too. If it is true that I grow as the church gathers in loving unity to build each other up, then it is true that my brothers and sisters in Christ grow as the church gathers together in loving unity to build each other up. If it is true that the gathering exhorts me and stirs me up to love and good works, then it is true that the gathering exhorts and stirs up my brothers and sisters in Christ.

I get to be a part of all that! As a part of the body, we get to be a part of the growth and encouragement of our brothers and sisters, simply by being there and doing what the church is called to do in its gatherings; reading, praying, singing, hearing, serving, embracing, sharing, giving, welcoming, breaking bread, drinking wine.

I gather to receive the blessings of the gathering, and I gather to be part of that blessing to others in the gathering. I gather for my own sake because I need the gathering, and I gather for the sake of others, because they need the gathering.

So we gather, because our brothers and sisters in Christ, need the gathering.



# It Allows Pastors to Shepherd

# 7

Paul tells us, in Ephesians 4v7-12, that Jesus' resurrection, as well as accomplishing all of the rich gospel truths of Ephesians 1-3, and enabling us to live out the free and transformed lives of Ephesians 4-6, also means that he was able to give certain gifts to his bride, the church. The gifts Paul is speaking of here are leadership positions given for the welfare of the church, including the office of pastor-teacher.

- Pastors were given to the church to equip the rest of the body of Christ to do the work of the ministry, which is to build one another up by speaking the truth in love to one another (Ephesians 4v7-16).
- Pastors are charged with the serious stewardship of keeping watch over the souls of their brothers and sisters (Hebrews 13v17).
- Pastors are called to shepherd the flock of God, serve it, oversee it and be examples to it (1 Peter 5v1-5).

Pastors shepherd the church in a number of ways such as praying for the church, guiding the church, living as an example to the church. One of the essential tasks of the pastors, in their shepherding of the church, is to proclaim God's word to God's people in the gatherings. Their public ministry of preaching and teaching in the gatherings is a command and gift of God to his people (2 Timothy 4v2).

This means that your pastor(s), one of Jesus' gifts to you, serves you by shepherding you through teaching you God's word. They equip you to do the work of the ministry by speaking the truth in love to you and showing you how to speak the truth in love to others.

As someone who has trusted in Jesus as Saviour, you are part of the universal body of Christ. However, you also get to commit yourself to a local expression of that body and willingly place yourself into the care of its leadership.

Although I am a pastor, I also have the privilege, as a co-pastor, of having the gift of a pastor. Although I spend a lot of time with Matt outside of the gatherings, one of the ways I receive Jesus' gift to me of having a pastor is by gathering with God's people when Matt preaches. One of the ways Matt receives Jesus' gift to him of having a pastor is by gathering with God's people when I preach.

Therefore, one of the reasons we gather is to allow our pastors to shepherd us by teaching us, equipping us and bringing God's word to connect with specific areas of our lives. If I am not a regular part of the gathering, then I am saying no to being lead, I am saying no to being placed under the care of called and equipped pastors. I am saying no to one of the essential gifts of Jesus to his people.

So we gather, to allow our pastors to shepherd us and care for our spiritual welfare.

## It Encourages Pastors

## 8

As well as explaining the responsibility pastors have, Hebrews 13v17 also outlines some of the responsibilities the church family has toward their pastors.

*Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.*

The words 'obey' and 'submit' do not mean "mindless submission, but persuasion". It means to be persuaded by, have confidence in, entrust yourself to, place yourself under. Essentially, to lovingly trust, listen to and follow your brother(s) in Christ.

The first reason is because of the responsibility the pastors have; to keep watch over their brothers' and sisters' spiritual wellbeing. The second is because, when we lovingly trust, listen to and follow our pastors, they can fulfil their responsibilities with joy, which, according to this verse, benefits the whole church family.

This verse is telling us that, sadly, pastoring can be discouraging, burdensome, disheartening. It also tells us, however, that pastoring can be joyous. And when it is joyous to the pastors it is profitable to their brothers and sisters.

One of the ways to encourage pastors is to be part of the gatherings. As pastors puts hours of work into preparing to teach and equip their church family at the gatherings, it is heartening for them when the church family does gather and they are able to shepherd and watch out for the spiritual welfare of those they are called to.

On the other hand, then, it can be discouraging for pastors to labour through a passage of scripture and prepare a message for their brothers and sisters, and for many to not be present. Although there are many legitimate reasons for not being able to come to the gatherings, there are other reasons that leave them "groaning" in discouragement.

To illustrate, imagine preparing a meal for a large group of friends and family. Think of all the work you put in to have the meal ready. As everyone comes and sits around the table, imagine the joy of seeing everyone together, enjoying what you prepared for them. Imagine, on the other hand, how it might feel to put all that preparation in, and on the day, many of your friends and family decided not to come.

So we gather, because we want the hearts of our pastors to be encouraged, and for them to be full of joy as they keep a watch over the spiritual welfare of their church family.

# It Proclaims Christ

9

God's people gather because Jesus is risen from the dead.

We sing the praises of God together because we have been made the people of God through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

We pray together because Jesus has made a way for us into the throne room of God through his death and resurrection.

We break bread and drink wine together, as a symbol of the death of Jesus and our experiencing him to be the Bread of Life who has brought us into the New Covenant, by his blood, through his death and resurrection.

We baptise people in our gatherings, as a symbol of them entering into new life in Jesus through trusting in his death and resurrection for them.

We greet one another with warmth and affection because we have been warmly welcomed into the family of God through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

We open God's word together to listen to it read and have it explained and applied to us, because we believe that the God of this book is our God, through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Our gatherings proclaim Christ. They proclaim his death and resurrection. They proclaim his rich character. They proclaim the wonderful promises that are ours in him. They proclaim the grace we have received because of him. They proclaim that we believe he is coming again to make all things new.

Our gatherings also proclaim this to the world around us. We strange folk have been gathering together for 2000 years, all around the globe, in the name of a Galilean Carpenter. And as the world watches on, as we gather together, week after week, some of them end up getting in on it too. Some of them come to realise that this Carpenter was God in the flesh, who died for their sins, and rose again to freely give them new life.

So we gather, because the very act of gathering together, loudly proclaims that Jesus is risen from the dead and coming again.

# WHY WE GATHER

So there you are, 9 reasons why we gather together.

1. We gather because we are a gathering.
2. We gather because Jesus died to make us a gathering.
3. We gather because God commands us to gather.
4. We gather because we have been gathering for 2000 years.
5. We gather because we need the gathering.
6. We gather because our brothers and sisters need the gathering.
7. We gather because it enables our pastors to shepherd us.
8. We gather because it encourages our pastors, which benefits us all.
9. We gather because it proclaims that Christ is risen, alive and coming again.

Local gathering of God's people in Christ, gather!

Local expression of God's called out assembly, assemble!

Local church, church!

Brother in Christ, sister in Christ, gather together with God's people.



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