



God's people gather. Notice that this is not a question: *God's people gather?* Nor is it a command: *God's people gather!* It is simply a statement of fact: *God's people gather.* This is just what they do.

God's people gather, and when they do, it is a place like no other. It is a place where you might find a high school linebacker carrying a walker up the stairs for a 90-year-old grandma. It is a place where a woman who was never able to have children of her own volunteers in the nursery so new moms can hear at least part of the service. It is a place where damaged addicts and confident young business owners sit side by side and confess their sins to God and hear the word of absolution. The gathering of God's people on earth is a unique gathering. It is a place where people who would never intentionally seek each other out come together. It is a place where those who are not welcomed anywhere else find a home.

In the very beginning after creating the heavens and the earth and making a man in his own image, God gives us his own assessment of how things were: "The Lord God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him'" (Genesis 2:18). We need God. But we also need other people. We were created as relational beings. We need connection. We need conversation. We need community.

Before the fall into sin, it seems that it was common for God to come and visit with the man and woman in the garden. After all, they knew what it sounded like when he walked in the garden (Genesis 2:8). After the fall, God could have remained separate from his sin-stained creatures forever, but instead, he drew near. He was there in the wilderness with his people in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. Later, his glory rested over the tabernacle and the temple as his dwelling place. Then God himself became the temple and lived among us in Jesus Christ (John 1:14). God comes all the way down to live with us, to be one of us, to be born, to eat, to drink, to sweat, to bleed, and to suffer, die and rise again, so that our sins could be forgiven, and we could be with him forever.

But then Jesus left. But before he did, he promised to be with his followers to the very end of the age (Matthew 28: 20). Wherever two or three gathered in his name and spoke the word of forgiveness to each other, Jesus promised that he would be with them (Matthew 18:20). To this day, whenever followers of Jesus gather together in his name, he is there to bless them with his special presence.

When the Holy Spirit was poured out on Pentecost, Peter preached about the crucified and risen Savior and about three thousand people were added to the number of believers that day! And no one had to tell them to gather together. The Holy Spirit created a desire in their hearts to live as the body of Christ. "Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:46-47). *God's people gather.*

As the good news of Jesus spread throughout the ancient world, believers gathered together in places separated by thousands of miles and in very different cultures. While there have been times of persecution and plague when believers have been unable to gather, they longed to do so. Even when groups were smaller or pushed underground, they gathered to comfort and console, to celebrate and to mourn, to laugh and to cry. *God's people gather.*

Now, there have always been exceptions. People have been unable to gather because of sickness, war, or disease. Others have had to live on frontiers or in isolation. In such situations we trust that the power of the gospel whether read, or spoken, or streamed through a high-speed connection can sustain faith. However, these are exceptions. Normally, God's people gather.

The coronavirus pandemic has prevented many people from gathering in person for worship. Thankfully, some have begun to come back. Others may need more time. And still others, might need a lot of encouragement. Here are some things for Christian leaders to keep in mind as they encourage their brothers and sisters in the faith.

Be patient and understanding

Christ has called us into his body which expresses itself in the imperfect, but redeemed reality of Christian congregations. As we encourage our brothers and sisters in the faith to return to in person worship, it is important to have patience and understanding. People respond to trauma in different ways. Some have lost loved ones or work in health care and have personally witnessed tremendous suffering. Others are taking care of an elderly parent or friend and are concerned about spreading the virus to someone more vulnerable than themselves. There are many reasons that some do not want to come back yet. It is important that we deal with individuals on a case-by-case basis, and we must be careful not to bind consciences

unnecessarily but show great patience and careful instruction as encourage individuals to return to in person worship.

There are also those who have been emotionally scarred by this. The response to the pandemic, racial unrest, and the presidential election were all opportunities for people to express their opinions and disagree on everything from masks to voter fraud. It should not surprise us that some might be hesitant to gather with Christians who posted offensive comments on social media that were on the “other” side of certain issues. Again, we must show great patience as we teach that the unity we have in Christ runs much deeper than any of our personal opinions. The apostle Paul encourages us, “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:3-6). No matter our opinions or personal preferences, we are one in Christ Jesus. While we might never agree about earthly procedures and practices, we are united by our common faith in Jesus Christ. This common bond can hold together even people with diverse political opinions.

It is also helpful to remember that people have different ways of dealing with fear and risk. It is sort of like whenever there is a building initiative at church. There are the “faith people” and there are the “cautious people.” The faith people want to move full speed ahead and can give the impression that those who do not want to move as quickly as they do lack faith. This is of course not true. The cautious people by their nature move forward more gingerly. They want greater analysis and more facts. They can accuse the faith people of lacking wisdom. This is not true either. The majority of the congregation usually lies somewhere in the middle. The same is true with people’s fear over the coronavirus. Christian leaders must learn to manage with patience the two extremes while encouraging the middle. While a certain amount of fear may be normal, fear must never be our master. People have different personal situations as well. That’s why we need to exercise love and compassion for each other. Love and compassion also include honor and respect. Simply because someone may not exercise his faith in God the same way I do in this matter doesn't mean I am superior to him or can despise her. We are all sinners for whom Christ died. Through Christ we are all now co-heirs of eternal life.

Emphasize the blessings of in person worship

Online worship and other tools proved to a blessing during the pandemic. We see God’s providence in the technological advances that allowed people to be fed by God’s Word and to virtually worship with each other. Some churches have been able to reach people they never would have reached in the past through online platforms. In some cases, we have been able to better serve those unable to attend public worship like shut-ins or those serving in the military

overseas. We can thank God for this gift of technology and strive to use it to the best of our ability.

However, there are several reasons why gathering in person is a preference to be encouraged. As we encourage those who are choosing simply to worship online because it is easier or more convenient, here are some things to keep in mind:

- 1) **Humans have a natural desire to be together.** The experience of the last year tells us that some things are better in person. Grandparents who had to resort to talking to their grandkids on digital devices for months know how much better it is to see them in person. Children who were subjected to months of online learning know that it is better to be with their teacher and classmates. When the apostle Paul wrote his letter to the Romans, he expressed how he longed to see them in person. Even though a letter, or a voice, or a computer screen can convey some type of “presence,” it is not optimal.

When we gather in person, we can see the friendly smile on someone’s face (or even in their eyes). We can sense the uncertainty or doubt in their voice. We can feel the confidence in their confession of faith. Humans are social creatures. Christians have a spirit-born desire to gather with others. To a certain degree, in many cases, when we encourage people to return to in person worship, we are simply encouraging them to do what they know is best.

- 2) **Jesus gives us his body and blood as a proclamation of his death.** In his last meal with his disciples, and in one of the most intimate moments of fellowship, Jesus took bread, broke it, and gave it to his disciples. “This is my body, which is given for you” (1 Corinthians 11:24b). Then he took some wine and shared it with them. “Drink from it all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” This gift is still given every time the Lord’s Supper is offered. The forgiveness of sins for you!

The Supper is also a visible expression of the unity we have in Christ. “Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all share the one loaf” (1 Corinthians 10:17). *Real* bodies gathered together to receive *real* bread and *real* wine to express the *real* oneness that we have through Jesus’ *real* body and blood. In the Supper we receive a wonderful gift, but we also express a wonderful truth: we are one in Christ. Not only that, but every time we celebrate this meal it is a visible proclamation of our Savior’s death (1 Corinthians 11:26). Bread is broken, wine is poured, Jesus is there, his death and resurrection proclaimed. This is not something that can be done individually behind a screen.

- 3) **We gather in a flock to be shepherded.** Peter addressed leaders in the New Testament church saying, “Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be” (1 Peter 5:2). God calls leaders in the church to be shepherds. These leaders feed, encourage, and disciple members of the flock. It is a blessing to be a member of the flock and to have a shepherd. They care for us and watch after us, so that nothing leads us astray and we remain in Christ.

- 4) **When we gather we can show God’s love.** A person can hear and learn God’s Word online. The preaching of God’s law and the sweet message of forgiveness can travel through ethernet cables and be reproduced on the other end. Faith can grow through virtual worship. However, the very name “church” implies that people gather together in an assembly. Our Savior came to be with us. God did not simply announce that the sins of the world were forgiven with a booming voice from heaven. He showed us what love is by sending his one and only Son into the world for us (1 John 4:9).

After serving his disciples by washing their feet, Jesus said, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34-35). As Christians gather together, they are presented with opportunities to reflect the love that Jesus has for them to each other and the world! It is so much easier to love a virtual family. If someone does something to offend or becomes disagreeable, we can easily log off. Not so in person. We must practice patience and restraint. We must put the faith living in our heart into practice. It is harder to love flesh and blood family when they do things that anger or annoy. But this is exactly the test of faith that John proposes (1 John 4:19).

Christians are the living body of Christ (Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12) in unity and diversity, and when we gather together, we are placed into a unique situation to give visible witness to this relationship. Paul says, “The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body” (1 Corinthians 12:12). There is no earthly organization quite like it. Power and pride have no place. People willingly put aside differences because they realize they are united by something deeper. What an example in our politically fractured society! Instead of striving for precedence and praise, Christians look to serve one another in love like their Savior has served them. While the visible church is never perfect this side of heaven, it is a group that looks strangely different from others and hopefully attracts their attention.

- 5) **When we gather we encourage one another.** The writer to the Hebrews encourages Christians saying, “And let us consider how we *may spur one another on* toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (Hebrews 10:24-25). Someone who is worshipping online might feel like they do not really need others to stay strong in their faith. That might be true (probably not), but others need them. When we gather together, we are spurring *one another on toward love and good deeds*. When we stand and confess our sins together we are saying, “I am just like you, a sinner, in need of help.” When we rejoice together at the word of absolution, sing hymns and confess our faith, we are encouraging others and being encouraged. In the entryway, when someone puts their hand on our shoulder and says, “I’ll pray that Jesus give you strength” or when we ask someone if there is anything we can do to help, we are encouraging one another as the Last Day approaches. Even if a person got absolutely nothing out of worship (which is unlikely), their presence, their words, and their smile encourages others. Worship is also about the other.
- 6) **When we gather we show what is important.** A family travels three hours on a Friday night for a soccer tournament the next day. They stay in a hotel, go out to eat, and spend six hours the next day sitting in lawn chairs beside a grass field. Late Saturday night they get home and crawl into bed. The next morning when everyone finally wakes up, mom and dad tell the kids, still in their PJ’s, to plop down on the couch and find their church’s livestream while they make coffee. Halfway through the first hymn dad walks in with two cups of coffee. During the reading of the first lesson the dog needs to go outside. Then mom’s phone dings. After the sermon everyone has had enough church for the day. Dad decides to end the service prematurely and everyone gets in line for the shower.

While this example might be a caricature, it is intended to make a point. What we do and how we do it sends a message. Just think of the message sent to the kids about the importance of soccer versus the importance of worship. While online worship may be a blessing in certain circumstances, it is important for us to consider the message we may be sending to others when worshipping online.

Going forward together

The pandemic has been a challenge for pastors and leaders in the church. Many of us have had to learn how to be flexible and adapt to an ever-changing set of circumstances. But sometimes challenges can also help us evaluate and refocus. Our mission is simple: to preach the gospel. Perhaps, our current situation gives us a unique opportunity to evaluate how well we have

been doing that. Some have said that things may never go back to the way they were before Covid-19. What things were we doing before this that may have been unnecessary? What things would we never want to change? How can we do things even better?

A couple of weeks ago, several members from an independent living home were finally allowed to come back to worship. As they walked through the doors, they could not stop smiling. As the congregation began singing the opening hymn, there was a tear in their eyes. They would never have known how much they appreciated this, until it was taken away from them for a time. There are many who have had a similar experience. You don't know what you got 'til it's gone. Are there ways that we can continue to fan and flame this newfound appreciation for gathering? Are there ways that we can make this contagious, so that others long to come back? These are questions that pastors and leaders must wrestle with in their own unique situation. On the same token, our confidence is in the Lord of the church—the one who gives life to dead. It is his church and not ours. If the gates of Hades will not overcome it, then neither will the consequences of the coronavirus.

God's people gather. It is not a question; it is a matter of fact. God's people gather because the faith that he plants in their hearts gives them a desire to be with others who share that faith. God's people gather, and when they do, they are not only strengthened and encouraged in their faith, they send a powerful message to the world. This is important. This matters. This is the body of Christ.