

Come Let Us Worship

The Purpose of Corporate Worship

Hebrews 10:19-25

Mark Vroegop

“Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” (Hebrews 10:19–25, ESV)

One of my least favorite situations in life is one that I’m sure you can relate to. It goes like this: I went to bed tired. My alarm goes off, and I swing my feet out of bed. I rub my eyes and try to get my bearings: “What day is it? What am I doing today?” And then (here it comes), I realize how tired I still feel, and I have this thought: “When can I get back into bed?”

That first thought of the day is reflective and predictive. It reflects the pressures that I’m facing or the pace at which I’m running. But it also has the possibility of messing up my attitude all day. The challenge with that first thought is that it is informed by the past and can hinder my future.

Your alarm went off this morning. When you realized it was Sunday, what was the first thought that ran through your mind?

- “NFL football is on in the afternoon. Can’t wait to watch the Colts lose again.”
- “When am I going to get groceries today?”
- “What are we going to eat for breakfast?”
- “How much time do we have before we need to leave for church?”

When you thought about coming to church today, what thoughts ran through your mind? Were you excited to come? Did your mind travel to the kind of sermon that you’d hear? Perhaps the songs that we’d sing? Perhaps the people that you’d meet? Did you think about your favorite seat and who stole it last week? Did you wonder about the temperature in the sanctuary or the volume level?

When you thought about gathering for corporate worship, what were your first thoughts? How you think about Sunday morning worship is both reflective of what is going on in your heart, and it is predictive of what your focus will be as you come.

And that is one of the many reasons why we are talking about corporate worship for the next three weeks.

Why this Series?

For quite a while I've been longing for us to explore the subject of corporate worship. Now, I'm not using the term "worship" this week primarily to mean singing, although that is certainly a central part of worship. When I say "corporate worship," I mean our weekly gathering together in Sunday services.

Over the next three weeks we are going to look at 1) The Purpose of Corporate Worship, 2) How and What Shall We Sing? and 3) The Aim of Preaching and Listening. I hope you'll not only come, but that you'll also have vibrant discussions with your Small Group about what you are going to learn.

By way of introduction, there are four paradoxes that are behind this series:

1) Worship is ordinary and special

Worship takes place every Sunday. For many of you, it is part of the normal rhythm of your week. Ordinarily attending worship is a good thing, but we also have to realize that the gathering of God's people is unlike any other assembly. It is very special.

2) Worship is personal and corporate

Sunday worship is a moment for you to meet with God, for you to sing, for you to both listen to and respond to the Word. But there's a real challenge here. Our culture prizes individualism and increasingly designs experiences around individual tastes. From your Spotify playlist, to your Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook feed, to your "go-to" news channel or mobile ordering preferences, we are increasingly conditioned to expect customization around what we like. But there is something really important about the corporate nature of the church. That's why there are metaphors describing the church as a temple (2 Cor. 6:16), God's building (1 Cor. 3:9), a household (Eph. 2:19), a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation (1 Peter 2:9), and a body (1 Cor. 12:12). So while the church is made up of people, it is much more than a collection of personal preferences. There's something bigger than the individuals involved.

3) Worship is inward and outward

Worship is a heart-oriented moment. It is a part of the spiritual formation process. It shapes us. Jonathan Edwards said that "affirmations should create affections." Worship reminds us what is true, and it shapes what we love. But worship is also about mission or an outward focus. You could think of it like a mirror that reflects the glory of God out into the world.¹ The joy of meeting with God becomes the fuel for gospel witness and faithful suffering. Engaging with God in worship results in engaging with the culture in the world. Worship and mission are vitally linked.

4) Worship is unifying and controversial

There is something beautiful about people from all walks of life gathering together under the banner of Jesus. As we greet, give, sing, pray, listen, and respond together, we identify that there is something

¹ Brett McCracken, *Uncomfortable – The Awkward and Essential Challenge of Christian Community*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017), 152.

more powerful than our individuality. When we refuse to let our preferences get in the way of our participation, it makes a powerful statement.² But I'm sure it comes as no surprise that worship can also be controversial. There's a reason why someone coined the phrase "worship war." And I've lived through my share of them.

And let me say from the outset that I am not doing this series because we have a crisis or a problem on our hands as it relates to Sundays. At the same time, I think it's important to recognize a few things:

- 1) **Our church membership is changing.** We have people coming from broader church traditions. And with that comes fears, expectations, and a broader array of preferences.
- 2) **Our culture is changing.** How we communicate, the style of preaching, what people wear to church, the kind of music, and the kind of environment is not the same as it was even five to six years ago.
- 3) **Our church model is changing.** As we launch new congregations, it presents an opportunity to reach our city and to contextualize ministry in terms of location and size. But it also could be a model where people join a new congregation simply because they want a church more to their liking.

For all these reasons, I think this is an important subject for us to talk about. I think it would be good to take a step back and consider why we gather on Sunday. What is the purpose behind Sunday morning?

Why Gather for Worship?

The book of Hebrews was written in the first century to a group of believers who were starting to feel the looming clouds of opposition. The book may have been one long sermon, and its aim was to encourage and warn the followers of Jesus about their need to be faithful in hardship.

If I had to choose two verses that summarized the message of the book, it would be Hebrews 12:2-3.

"looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted." (Hebrews 12:2-3, ESV)

The book is filled with some of the strongest warnings in the New Testament (3:12-19; 6:1-12) and some of the most eloquent verses on the supremacy of Christ (8:1-10:18).

Immediately following the three beautiful and Christ-exalting chapters of 8-10, the writer addresses the gathering of God's people: "not neglecting to meet together" (10:25). So, let's look at Hebrews 10:19-25 to see two purposes for Sunday worship.

² McCracken, 149

To Rehearse the Gospel

Believers in Jesus Christ gather on the first day of the week, Sunday, because of what they believe. Underneath their assembly are affirmations.

The singular truth that brings believers together is the gospel – that Jesus saves sinners. Or as I have summarized it: “*God is holy, I am not; Jesus saves, Christ is my life.*” When we gather together, we do so to rehearse that message.

You can see this pretty easily in verse 19, with the words “Therefore brothers since . . .” The community of Christ gathers because of spiritual realities that lie underneath every one of their lives. And in this short section, there are four aspects of the gospel that we need to rehearse:

We have spiritual confidence to meet with God (v. 19a). The word “confidence” carries the idea of authorization or boldness in intimidating circumstances. This passage connects this in a figurative way to the “holy places,” a reference to temple worship in the Old Testament. Most religions live in fear of their god. But Christians celebrate reconciliation between themselves and God. As we gather we stand in awe of our access to our Creator.

Can you think of a moment where you had access to something that was really special? Can you think of a moment when you thought, “I can’t believe this!”

When we moved to Indianapolis in 2008, I told my very sad boys that if the Lord was calling us to move, there would be ways that they would see the blessing of the Lord. I asked them to trust the Lord and me. Well, in 2009 we were invited by one of the coaches of the Colts to attend the AFC championship game against the Jets. After a stunning victory by the Colts, he invited us on the field. And then he said, “Follow me.” We trotted behind him into the tunnel with the players, and the next thing we knew, we were inside the locker room. When Jim Caldwell said, “Everyone take a knee,” we joined the team huddle. I snapped a picture and texted it to my brother-in-law: “Guess where I am right now!”

You know that there is a certain kind of emotion you feel when you are somewhere special.

That is what believers have when it comes to their relationship with God. They have a very special authorization. And we need to remind ourselves of that and rehearse the unbelievable privilege of coming into God’s presence.

We have a permanent sacrifice for sin through Jesus (v. 19b). The little phrase “by the blood of Jesus” tells us that atonement for sin has been made. Hebrews 10:12 celebrates the fact that instead of a repeated – daily – sacrifice for sins, Jesus offered a “single sacrifice.” And 10:14 says that by that single sacrifice He perfected *for all time* those who are being sanctified.

What’s more, we are reminded that atonement is not something that human beings can achieve on their own. Reconciliation with God only happens because of Jesus. Rehearsing the gospel means that we rejoice in what we could not do and in what Jesus did.

We have a new relationship with God (v. 20). Once again, the writer of Hebrews uses an Old Testament metaphor of a curtain that separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the temple. And

he celebrates how Jesus makes a new way for a new relationship with God. This “new and living way” is the New Covenant. It is the heart-based change that the prophets talked about (see Ezekiel 36) and what Jesus described in John 3 as being “born again.” When the church gathers, we rehearse the change that Jesus created in us.

We have a living advocate in heaven (v. 21). We celebrate the fact that the risen Christ is seated in heaven as our victor (Heb. 10:12). He understands (Heb. 4:15). He is praying for us (Heb. 7:25, Rom. 8:34). We rehearse who is really in control. Who is really in charge. And who will win the final battle.

We agree with the following lines:

*When I fear my faith will fail
Christ will hold me fast
When the tempter would prevail
He will hold me fast
I could never keep my hold
Through life's fearful path
For my love is often cold
He must hold me fast*

Now why do we need to rehearse this gospel? Because all week long you were fed and believed another gospel message. You were told: “You are the most important person in the world,” and “Your worth is connected to what you do or don’t do, what you look like and don’t look like, or what other people think of you.” All week long you were tempted to believe things that aren’t true about God or yourself. And you probably looked for fulfillment or satisfaction in all kinds of places besides God.

Sunday is designed to wage war on those false gospels. You see, all week long your flesh didn’t just stumble into sin; it worshipped its way into sin.³ The gathering on Sunday and the rehearsal of the gospel assaults the battle-zone.

Worship pronounces the end of our attempts at self-justification and puts a stop to our self-salvation projects by declaring Christ as the only One who can justify us before God. It proclaims death to the Old Adam in us who desperately wants to stand before God on his own two feet and present his own works as worthy of God’s pleasure.⁴

This worship war makes profound statements to ourselves and the values of our culture. One theologian put it this way:

Every time the Church assembles to [worship], to ‘proclaim the death of Christ’ (1 Cor. 11: 26), it proclaims also the end of the world and the failure of the world . . . You will be made new but you first must die.⁵

³ Zac Hicks, *The Worship Pastor: A Call to Ministry for Worship Leaders and Team*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 83.

⁴ Hicks, 83.

⁵ Hicks, 82. Quoting Jean-Jacques von Allmen

The purpose of worship is to rehearse the gospel. Worship is a war of remembrance.

To Respond to the Gospel

The second purpose of corporate worship is to respond to the gospel. In other words, if the gospel is indeed true, then what should we do? What is the connection between the truth about the gospel and what happens every Sunday?

In verses 22-25, there are three “let us” statements: Let us draw near (v. 22), Let us hold fast (v. 23), and Let us consider . . . (v. 24). Let me try to make it very simple. The gospel requires us to come, to cling, and to consider.

Come

This is a divine invitation to be brought near to God’s presence. The phrase “draw near” was often used of sacred moments. When Abraham talked with God about how Sodom could be spared, he drew near (Genesis 18:23). When the people of Israel assembled at the base of Mt. Sinai, they drew near (Exodus 20:21). And when the people gathered near the tabernacle, they drew near (Leviticus 9:5). Even the word church means “called out ones.” Drawing near has worship in its history.

If we dig a little more, we’d find that it means to continually come. No matter how young or old, how long you’ve been a Christian, how long you’ve been searching . . . no matter how many years it’s been, or how far you’ve wandered, the invitation is clear: come.

Once again, we see that our coming is reflective of what God has done for us in Christ. When a person receives Christ, he has a heart that is cleansed of an evil conscience. Everything you’ve done is forgiven. When a person receives Christ, she has a new kind of purity, a fundamental change of life. And as a result, we can come with a true heart in full assurance.

You come to worship not because you are worthy but because you have been cleansed. You come to worship not because you never doubt but because you trust in Christ. You come to worship not because you’ve been perfect last week but because you believe in a Savior who was perfect for you. You don’t come to worship to see your friends, to sing the songs you like, or to hear a message from your favorite preacher. No, you come because you are meeting with God. You are drawing near. You don’t come as a church shopper, you come as a cleansed sinner. You don’t come for what you can “get out of the service”; you come because of what has already been done for you.

If you understand and believe the gospel, you must and will come. Corporate worship is vital to your soul. Without it, your spiritual strength and vitality will falter.

Cling

The second response to the gospel is to cling to what we believe. Verse 23 says “let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.” The drawing near aspect of worship creates deep roots in our confidence. The gathering of God’s people gives us assurance and perseverance to live another week.

Martin Lloyd Jones believed there was a connection between worship and the perseverance of the early church. He said, "This is how Christianity conquered the ancient world. It was this amazing joy of these people. Even when you threw them into prison, or even to death, it did not matter, they went on rejoicing; rejoicing in tribulation."⁶

Do you sense that in your life? Have you had it happen that the gathering in corporate worship helped you cling to what you believed a little better? Did someone else's singing help you to be reminded that Jesus is indeed faithful?

Or do you come into worship not looking to hold fast to your confession but to your preferences or what you like? It can happen so easily. In C.S. Lewis' *Screwtape Letters* he says that the church is one of the devil's most effective allies. All that must be done is to:

*... get the new Christian to fixate on other people in the pews – especially those who have squeaky boots and double chins, and who sing off-key. The more unattractive and unimpressive the members of the church appear to the Christian, the more cynical he will be toward the local church itself. And the more cynical he becomes toward the local church, the more cynical he will become about Christianity as a whole.*⁷

As we come to worship we must cling to our confession, not our cynicism.

Consider

This is one of the most important and most surprising points about worship. The writer says that our gathering should be a particularly focused on how to "stir up one another for love and good works." We are commanded to consider this, which has the idea of thoughtful attention and deep concern.⁸ In other words, there is supposed to be an abiding concern for others as we gather.

Part of our mission in gathering together is not only to hold fast to what we believe but also to care for one another. We are to celebrate the gospel but also to display the gospel in how we treat one another.

The weekly gathering of God's people is an opportunity for us to put the gospel into practice. Rick Warren says it really well:

*The local church is the classroom for learning how to get along in God's family. It is a lab for practicing unselfish, sympathetic love. As a participating member you learn to care about others and share the experiences of others . . . Only in regular contact with ordinary, imperfect believers can we learn real fellowship and experience the New Testament truth of being connected and dependent on one another.*⁹

And that is why the text says that we ought not to forsake meeting together, especially as the Day draws near. The harder and more challenging life gets, the more you need the church. Apparently,

⁶ McCracken, 152.

⁷ Scott Sauls, *Jesus Outside the Lines – A Way Forward for Those Tired of Taking Sides*, (Carol Stream: Tyndale, 2015), 48

⁸ David L. Allen, *Hebrews*, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2010), 517.

⁹ Sauls, 48.

there were some believers who just didn't think meeting together was that important, so they started to neglect it.

Does that "shoe" fit you?

- Do you find convenient ways to neglect meeting on Sundays or in your Small Group?
- Does your schedule reflect the prioritization of church?
- Is your heart in the right place when you come to worship?
- Does your generosity in terms of time and money say the right thing?
- Do you look for people to care and love on while you are present?

Listen! My aim is not to guilt you into coming to church more. But I do want you to realize that there is a divinely given purpose for our gathering every Sunday.

In light of this, could I challenge you to do three things:

- 1) Prepare.** Would you take some time to prepare your heart for the Lord's Day? Be sure that your schedule is not so full that you are exhausted when you come. And would you take some time to pray as you come? Pray for your heart, pray for our singing, pray for the sermon.
- 2) Engage.** Would you consider how you might be more engaged on Sunday? Whether it is how you talk to people, look for guests, find a way to serve, sing robustly, or listen intently, let's be a people who are "all in" with Sundays. This day is important.
- 3) Share.** Would you think about how you might encourage someone today with what you've learned? Talk about it on the ride home. What did God teach you? And then would you look for others in our community who don't have a church home? Let your excitement for what God is doing in your life become the platform for a compelling invitation.

I want you to come with the right perspective. I want the first thoughts of the day to be: "Awesome! It's Sunday. I can't wait to rehearse and respond to the gospel. I can't wait to meet with the Lord and love on some people from my church today."

"What binds us together is not common education, common race, common income levels, common politics, common nationality, common accents, common jobs, or anything of the sort. Christians come together, not because they form a natural collocation, but because they have been saved by Jesus Christ and owe him a common allegiance. In the light of this common allegiance, in light of the fact that they have all been loved by Jesus himself, they commit themselves to doing what he says—and He commands them to love one another. In this light, they are a band of natural enemies who love one another for Jesus's sake."¹⁰

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¹⁰ D.A. Carson, *Love in Hard Places*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2002).