

# The Church Meets Together

Text: Hebrews 10:19-25

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**Scriptures:** 1 Chronicles 16:23-30; Hebrews 10:19-25; Revelation 4; 19:1-5

**Songs Chosen:** Behold Our God, [SttL] 359, 501, 87b, 391, 134

<b>Series:</b>	Occasional (Profession of faith)
<b>Theme:</b>	In light of their being persecuted, the Hebrews (Jewish Christians of the Dispersion) are exhorted to new covenant corporate (gathered) worship
<b>Proposition:</b>	Worship the Lord, edifying one another, gathering together regularly in Christ

## Introduction

The word ‘expat’ is a shortened form of ‘expatriate’, and it generally refers to anyone who has chosen to live away from their native home country, either temporarily or permanently. ‘Expat’ used to mean “one who is banished,” but later took on the meaning “*one who chooses to live abroad*”. A number of us here today are ‘expats’ in the newer sense of the term. We have voluntarily emigrated here to NZ.

The Greek speaking Jews to whom the letter to the Hebrews was written were ‘expats’ in the older sense of the word. They were living away from their homeland of Israel, not because they wanted to do so, but because they had been scattered by persecution. This ‘Diaspora’ or dispersion had occurred when the Assyrians invaded, then the Babylonians, and later the Romans. The book of Acts records (Acts 8:1) the scattering of the church in Jerusalem under the persecution in which Saul of Tarsus (who would later become the Apostle Paul) was involved.

These ‘expat’ Jewish Christians knew about worship. They were very familiar with the Temple building, priests and the sacrificial system as prescribed in the Old Testament. Some, many, perhaps most, would have visited Jerusalem at some times in their lives for one or more of the great annual events on the Jewish calendar e.g. Passover, Pentecost, The Day of Atonement.

We know that when ethnic people groups live away from their homeland, they like to meet together as those with a common history and identity whilst living in a foreign land. For example, the British might meet up in an old-style pub and drink English ale, those from the Netherlands might do so in a ‘Dutch Club’, celebrating the new year with oliebollen, Americans may gather round a meal table for Thanksgiving with turkey and pumpkin pie.

For dispersed Jewish people they met in a synagogue. In fact, by the 1<sup>st</sup> century **synagogues** had been built in many towns within Roman-occupied Israel, for Jews who were not expats. The word ‘synagogue’ is of Greek origin meaning ‘to bring together’, or ‘to assemble’. The functions of the synagogue are reflected in three Hebrew terms:

- Bet ha-kneset “house of assembly”
- Bet ha-midrash “house of study”
- Bet ha-tefilla “house of prayer”

The synagogue was the place where Jews met to worship God on the Sabbath, as Jesus did, together with others from his home town of Nazareth (Luke 4:16ff)

Which brings us to our 1<sup>st</sup> point:

## 1. Worship

Worship can be defined as *“the proper response of all moral, sentient beings to God, ascribing all honour and worth to their Creator-God precisely because he is worthy, delightfully so”* (D.A. Carson) Angels and human beings are moral, sentient beings, created to worship their Creator. We know that God’s Word in the Old Testament calls us to worship Him e.g. *“Worship the Lord in the splendour of holiness”* (Ps 96:9; 1 Chron 16:29b)

However, the meaning of the language of worship in the Bible (e.g. temple, sacrifice, priest) has been radically transformed by the work of Christ. The writer of the book of Hebrews extensively expounds this truth. Jesus is the Great High Priest (4:14-7:28); He Himself is the full and final sacrifice for sins (7:27; 10:1-18); He is the new Temple (10:19-20); He is the Mediator of a new covenant (9:15)

The writer to the Hebrews explains that the OT system of worship was *“but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities”* ... it could *“never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who **draw near**”* (10:1). The verb to draw near (prosechomai) is used in the Greek OT to describe the **approach to God by the Levitical priests in worship** (e.g. Num 16:40, 18:22; Lev 21:17).

Brothers and sisters in the Lord, now in the light of Christ’s completed new covenant work:

- We no longer need human priests to draw near to God in worship,
- We no longer need to bring blood sacrifices,
- We no longer need to come to a physical temple building.

But even more...We have **open access** into the Holy of Holies, the inner sanctuary of the temple into the very presence of God! The writer to the Hebrews describes this new way of approaching God in this way: *“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”* (Hebrews 10:19-22)

*“Let us draw near”* here is a call to new covenant worship. Not only do the OT sacrifices, priesthood and temple fall away, their foreshadowing purpose having been fulfilled in Christ. Worship itself is no longer a solely Sabbath focused, exclusively covenant community event. In Christ, the worship of God is broadened/expanded to encompass all of life.

To put this radical change another way, there are no longer any uniquely sacred times or locations. At every time of every day in every place, we can each draw near to God in worship, gaining access to His holy presence in Christ. *“Great are the works of the LORD, studied by all who delight in them”* (Psalm 111:2) *“Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power”* (Rev 4:11) (Pause)

However, some people, say, in light of this truth, we don't need to worship together, it's purely an individual matter. 'Just me and my God. I have Christ, and through Him constant access to God, gathering together as a church for worship on Sunday is an optional extra and I've decided to opt out!'

Here we need to be especially careful to grasp the whole truth about worship from God's Word. Yes, new covenant worship is a 24-hour x7 day per week individual privilege for every believer. Praise God for this precious freedom of continuous access His holy presence! **But also**, new covenant worship, like old covenant worship is a collective, assembled, worship of God's gathered people. This truth is clear from the book of Hebrews: In 3:6 the writer says "*Christ is faithful over God's house as a son. And we are his house if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope.*"

God's house is not a church building, it is His people collectively, who are themselves, as the body of Christ, part of the living temple (1 Pet 2:5). We know only too well here in Christchurch that physical buildings can crack and crumble when seismic waves violently move the earth below. Likewise, persecution and pressure can severely shake God's people. Some of these dispersed Jewish Christians had already been severely shaken, "*being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated*" (10:33).

You probably know that a human pyramid is an acrobatic formation of three or more people in some support others on top of them, who in turn may support other, higher tiers of people. If one person in the structure starts to wobble or collapses completely, the whole pyramid is at great risk of tumbling down. Like a coach instructing a team of acrobats, about to be formed into a living structure which is being built up, the writer the Hebrews exhorts believers in 10:23: "*Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful*".

In a human pyramid, the strength of the whole is very much affected by the strength of each part, that is why it is so important for each one of us to be actively involved in building one another up in the church, just like acrobats might encourage one another to keep on 'putting in the hard yards' of physical training so that the whole troupe grows strong and remains in robust condition.

Which brings us to our 2<sup>nd</sup> point:

## **2. Edification**

One of the many ways in which you can initiate an 'ecclesiastical bun fight' – that's 'code language' for division in the church☺ - is to start a conversation about worship! It's one of those 'hot topics' where most people have a strong opinion! In many churches, brothers and sisters in Christ have been battered and bruised through 'worship wars'.

Some will point to the OT and say "*Worship is all about focusing on God. Anything else is idolatry*". Others will point to NT passages like our text in Heb 10:24 "*let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works*" saying "Worship in the NT is all about edification – building one another up spiritually". In the context of worship – the dominant theme of the book of Hebrews – this verse does speak of 'edification' – the building up of one another as the body of Christ, the 'spiritual house' of God (1 Pet 2:5). In the church, the role of ministers like myself is to '*equip the saints for the work of ministry for **building up** the body of Christ*' (Eph 4:12)

A key work of ministry for us all is highlighted in our text: To consider (think about, be aware of) how to stir (stimulate, encourage) one another to love (that is love God and others) and be engaged in good works (e.g. proclaiming Christ both in the ministries of the church and in our own spheres of life). Is NT worship then about building one another up? Yes. This is undeniable from the Scriptures.

Did you know that the worship service liturgy which John Calvin presented was “*entirely directed toward edification*” (Ref. his commentary on 1 Corinthians)? Some Christian writers like David Peterson insist that ‘the distinctive element of corporate church meetings is **not** worship but edification’. We should, they say, therefore stop using terms like ‘worship services’ and talking about meeting together ‘to worship’.

Are sincere Christians like Mr Peterson correct, especially in light of Calvin’s focus on edification in church service liturgy? The question is a reasonable one to ask, especially given that there is **no** single passage in the NT which establishes a clear pattern for gathered, corporate, worship –giving us all the elements of a worship service in order.

However, our text today clearly speaks of mutual encouragement/edification in the context of worship. The gathered worshipping church is to be an encouraging community where we understand that we are a spiritual house composed of living stones being used by God to build others up in Christ. Each one of us is an integral part of the church which Christ is building in this place. Like a human pyramid, we depend on one another, just as the many parts of our bodies rely on one another (1 Cor 12:12-27).

So, NT worship is most definitely ‘horizontal’ it necessarily involves the encouragement of one another as we wait for the Day when Christ will return in glory, judgement and final fulfilment of God’s promises to His people.

Sadly, at times, local churches can be less-than-encouraging communities to be part of. We can be so concerned about the perceived risk of ‘puffing someone’ up and expressing thanks for their presence, service and life in Christ, that we never really encourage them at all. I know of a pastor who served for many years in a congregation who received little or no encouragement. When he returned for a visit after his time as pastor ended and people said how much they had appreciated his work, he was utterly astounded.

Based on our text, when we do not encourage one another, we are not worshipping the Lord as He commands us to. For example, how have you been able to encourage Matthew (in his walk with the Lord and in his studies) over these past three years that he has been a member of this local church? Have you already been an encouragement to Rob and Michele – stimulating them to love and good works? Do you intend to be in the future? How will you stir them up so that they become more and more an integral part of the living temple of God in this place?

Encouraging one another is part of building one another up which is a key characteristic of new covenant worship. However, the ‘horizontal’ focus on one another is not the only element of true worship. Why do I say that?

Because true worship is necessarily, by definition, God-centred. The second commandment leaves us in no doubt about that (Exo 20:4-6), as does the whole thrust of the Bible. There is a continuity in Scripture which reveals the focus on God in worship both in the OT and in the future gathering

of God's people in the New Heavens and New Earth (e.g. Rev 19:1-5). We are not in a period of history where God-centred worship has somehow been temporarily replaced by mutual edification. However, as we have seen from our text, encouraging one another is a key element of new covenant worship. How then do we put all this together?

In brief, the God-centred aspect of worship enables the mutual edification/encouragement aspect of new covenant worship. It is **as** we focus on the Lord in gathered worship in our congregational singing, our sitting together under the authority of the Word, our uniting together in congregational prayer, our celebration of the sacraments, our confession of faith as one body, that we learn to edify one another, to encourage one another, to forbear with one another, to stir one another up to love and good deeds. Communal/corporate worship of God **and** edification of one another are **both** key elements of new covenant worship.

Which brings us to our 3<sup>rd</sup> point: Assembling

### 3. Assembling

18<sup>th</sup> century English churchman John Wesley once said, "*There is nothing more unchristian than a solitary Christian*". You could sum up the words '*not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some*' by saying 'don't be a solitary Christian'. Don't attempt to be a 'lone ranger' Christian. Don't be like a hot coal taken out of the fire which then cools off as it is removed from the collective heat of the gathered coals in the fireplace.

Notice that 'not neglecting to meet together' is the **second half** of the exhortation in v24 '*And let us stir up one another to love and good works*'. In the 1<sup>st</sup> century, **the church needed to assemble together** in order for members to encourage fellow believers to love God and one another and to be engaged in works of ministry. In the 1<sup>st</sup> century, **the church needed to assemble together** in order to worship God as a body.

Today, some things have changed. We now have phones, emails, skype, live-streaming and video conferencing technology. Whilst these means of communication can certainly be used to build one another up through encouragement and exhortation, they **do not** replace physically meeting together. Communication is always better face-to-face, in person, in the flesh. Often in our human relationships, we need to leave the phone, email, Facebook messaging etc. behind and go and visit someone in person.

So it is with meeting together for God-centred worship and for mutual edification. The church community needs to **regularly meet together** as a body. The word used for 'meet together' is an interesting compound term. It's derived from the Greek word 'synagogue' which, as we've heard earlier in this sermon, means 'to bring together', 'to assemble together'. But it has a 'prefix' attached to the front ('epi'). There are a couple of possible reasons for this prefix:

- a) The writer to the Hebrews wanted to **distinguish** this Christian meeting together from synagogue worship – which these Jewish Christians would have been thoroughly familiar with.
- b) This 'prefix' can point to a **particular location**, which would mean that 'meet together' refers to the meeting together of believers at a certain place.

We can't be precisely sure about the reason why the writer chose this compound word, but these possible reasons do make sense. The Jewish Christians back then may well have thought: 'now that we have continuous access to God through Christ, why bother meeting together?'. Non-church attending, or seldom attending, professing Christians today often think like this. In addition, for these early Jewish Christian believers, the risk of persecution and capture was higher when they were visibly gathered together.

The use of a prefix to indicate a particular place would also make sense because we know from the New Testament that congregations assembled together regularly in different locations (e.g. Corinth, Philippi, Smyrna, Laodicea). Some non-church-gathering-attending, or seldom-attending, believers say things like 'well I am part of the universal invisible church', I don't need to commit to being part of a local congregation. How does God's Word help us here?

It is certainly true that the whole body of Christ is made up of all God's elect, throughout the world now, and also those who have gone to glory and those yet to live and come to Christ. This whole body of true believers is often called the 'invisible' or 'universal church'. However, the Bible is clear that, when it comes to believers gathering together, they do **so in particular places as local churches** (e.g. 1 Cor 12:12-31).

Remember that the writer to the Hebrews is communicating with widely scattered Jewish Christians – part of the Jewish Diaspora of times past. He's not saying, '*travel long distances and meet together as one group of gathered Jewish Christians – every believer on the planet in one place at one time*'. The only Biblically consistent interpretation is that he is exhorting believers to gather together for congregational worship as local churches in particular places. Why?

So that they could 'confidently enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus' as a **gathered congregation** just as they had done so through the week as scattered individuals. So that they could encourage and build one another up in the Lord.

So how does this apply to us? We are in the same period of redemptive history as they were – **after** the completed work of Christ through His conception, life, suffering, death, ascension and resurrection, but **before** His second coming. We then, like them, are called by God not to '*neglect to meet together*'. 'Meet together' here does not **exclusively** mean church services on the Lord's Day – it includes other meetings like Bible study and fellowship groups. However it certainly does include church services, where believers would gather together for '*teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayers*' (Acts 2:42) and to worship God as an assembled congregation. The word 'neglect' here means to abandon/desert/leave behind/forsake. This **does not mean** that if someone misses a church service, they have broken a command of Scripture and have therefore sinned. However, for those able to travel to the place of assembly, if they make a **habit** of consistently abandoning meeting together with other believers in a local church for God-centred worship and mutual edification, then they are **not living consistently with the commands in our text**. (pause)

I've tried to anticipate some possible questions which may arise from this sermon:

**ONE** Is the worship of God's people gathered on the Lord's Day **more important** than when they worship individually through the week? Christian author Robert Rayburn writes: "*When there are a number of worshippers present, there is a participation in worship which is more*

*intense than is the individual passion of any one of them when he is by himself. It is common knowledge that a mob is **more cruel** than any individual would be by himself. Similarly, the enjoyment of an elite company of music lovers at the symphony is **more intense** than that of a single music lover sitting by himself listening to the same music. God has so created man that there are deeper delights and more intense inspiration in the worshipping congregation than in individual devotion”*

Martin Luther said, “*At home in my own house there is no warmth or vigour in me, but in the church when the multitude is gathered together, a fire is kindled in my heart and it breaks its way through”*”.

Some Christians describe Lord’s Day worship as the ‘highlight of the week’. In the sense of being more intense this conveys some truth, providing that we understand that new covenant worship is a **way of life** with continuous access to God through Christ. We cannot rightly honour the Lord in our gathered, corporate, worship on a Sunday **if we have not** been worshipping individually throughout the week.

**TWO** should you and I regularly attend the afternoon corporate worship service here in addition to the morning service?

Here are some possible answers:

- a) The elders call us all to worship twice on the Lord’s Day – every communicant church member should be there, because they have vowed to ‘honour the office bearers of the church’.
- b) If you love the Lord, why would you not want to gather for corporate worship at least twice on a Sunday?
- c) Nowhere in the Bible does the Lord command us to go to church twice on a Sunday.

There’s truth in all these statements. At our church visitation last Friday in response to a question about how the church services were attended, we noted that generally **less than half** of this congregation come to the second (afternoon) service. The elders are not sure why this is and may well ask you about this over the coming weeks. Some of the reasons why there can be hesitation in raising this topic in the church include:

- a) Not wanting to tell people that it is their **duty** to attend two corporate worship services every Sunday because Scripture does not explicitly command this and we do not want to be legalistic.
- b) Some people are **not familiar** with the practice of two corporate worship services each Lord’s Day, especially those who have not assembled together with us as a congregation for very long.
- c) It’s a topic people can be **quite resistant** about. There’s even unofficial terminology in the RCNZ referring to some people as being ‘once-ers’ and others as ‘twice-ers’. It can be difficult to change established patterns of how we spend the Lord’s Day. We need to balance Christian liberty with faithfulness to Christ’s commands

So what can we say about this from our text? Whilst **an individual worshipful walk** with the Lord is essential for every believer in order to worship the Lord ‘in Spirit and in truth’ in assembly with others on the first day of the week, the Bible is clear that **we must not abandon meeting together for gathered worship**.

When we are regularly absent from the meeting together of the whole church our not being there does affect our brothers and sisters. When we are absent, we are **not** stirring them up to love and good works or being stimulated towards these gospel goals ourselves. When we are absent, we are **not** there encouraging them, or being encouraged. In fact, our absence (when we could be there if we wanted to be) generally functions as a discouragement to those who have not neglected to meet together.

If you are someone who does not regularly come to both worship services on a Sunday but would be able to do so if you chose to, I want to encourage you to seriously think about coming.

Our afternoon services generally have more focus on teaching and this is usually assisted by a question and answer time after the service - when I am leading the service.

We believe that we are only to worship the Lord in the ways in which He has commanded and therefore limit the elements in our liturgy e.g. prayer, reading of Scripture, congregational singing, preaching, sacraments and taking up of offerings. This approach, which we are persuaded is Biblical, is termed the 'regulative principle of worship'. The question and answer time in our afternoon service is an additional element, not to gathered worship directed towards the Lord and for mutual edification, but to gathering together just for mutual edification.

This sermon may well have brought a number of questions to your mind. If so, I warmly invite you to come to the next afternoon service which I am scheduled to lead here in two weeks' time on 25<sup>th</sup> November!

Brothers and sisters in our Lord, we are all 'expats' living away from our true home. We are sojourners, exiles, aliens living on an earth which is passing away. This land is a foreign place for all God's people, our citizenship is in the New Heavens and New Earth.

Until we arrive there, *“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”* (Heb 10:24-25)

AMEN