



Foreword by David Platt



gather

LOVING YOUR CHURCH
AS YOU CELEBRATE CHRIST TOGETHER

TONY MERIDA

CONTENTS

Foreword <i>by David Platt</i>	9
Introduction:	
A Renewed Vision of the Gathering	13
1 The Gift of Gathering	23
2 Gathering to Stir Up One Another	35
3 Gathering to Hear God's Word	47
4 Gathering to Sing Together	57
5 Gathering to Pray Together	67
6 Gathering to Celebrate the Gospel in the Ordinances	79
7 Gathering to Reach Outsiders	93
8 Gathering to Scatter	107
Conclusion	119
Discussion Guide for Small Groups	125
Bibliography	135

1. THE GIFT OF GATHERING

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 10:24

It is remarkable that we are able to worship God together at all. In Hebrews 10:19-25, the writer concisely describes how God makes worshipers in the first place: through *the gracious work of Christ*. To even be able to worship God is a divine privilege of grace. Apart from Jesus, though we may attend a gathering, we are on the outside of what is really going on:

*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)

This is a crucial text for us as we think about gathering, and it makes three main exhortations, the first two of which we will look at in this chapter, and the third of which we'll enjoy in chapter 2:

- Let us draw near to God.
- Let us hold fast to our confession.
- Let us consider how to stir up one another.

But these exhortations do not come out of nowhere. They are *responses to the work of Christ on behalf of sinners* (v 19-21). Jesus' work, and Jesus' work alone, enables and motivates our worship and obedience. Jesus has given us access to God. It is because of what Jesus has done for us that we can respond in *faith* (v 22), *hope* (v 23), and *love* (v 24). It is because of what Jesus has done for us that we can gather with confidence to worship the God who is present with us.

WORSHIP AS A RESPONSE TO CHRIST'S WORK

Why is it that you and I can so confidently enter the presence of the perfect, awesome God, who is a "consuming fire"? It is certainly not because of our own performance! Believers have confidence to enter the

presence of God not based on our works but based on Christ's work on our behalf. As the hymn writer put it:

*Before the throne of God above
I have a strong and perfect plea;
A great High Priest, whose name is Love,
Who ever lives and pleads for me.*

*My name is graven on his hands,
My name is written on his heart.
I know that while in heaven he stands
No tongue can bid me thence depart,
No tongue can bid me thence depart.*

*When Satan tempts me to despair
And tells me of the guilt within,
Upward I look and see him there
Who made an end to all my sin.⁶*

When we consider afresh what Christ has done for us—when we feel his love deeply in our hearts and when we revel in our new standing before God—then the instinct is to worship God. A failure to prioritize or enjoy the gathering of God's people is often tied to the failure to apply such rich gospel truths to our hearts. Which means that the time when you and I most need to attend the corporate gathering is when we do not feel like it! It is in those times that we most need other Christians to sing and speak and show the gospel to us. In his classic

6 Charitie Lees Bancroft, "Before the Throne of God Above," https://hymnary.org/text/before_the_throne_of_god_above_i_have_a_ (accessed Dec. 16, 2022).

book *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a persecuted Christian in Nazi Germany, had this to say:

*The Christian needs another Christian who speaks God's Word to him. He needs him again and again when he becomes uncertain and discouraged ... The Christ in his own heart is weaker than the Christ in the word of his brother; his own heart is uncertain, his brother's is sure. And that also clarifies the goal of all Christian community: they meet one another as bringers of the message of salvation ... Their fellowship is founded solely upon Jesus Christ.*⁷

You have the privilege not only of drawing near to God in worship through the finished work of Jesus but also of reminding your brothers and sisters of the gospel through your words of encouragement, your singing, and your prayers.

Consider afresh the privilege: *we can draw near to God*. No worshiper in the old covenant would have been bold enough to attempt entry into the Most Holy Place, the dwelling place of God in the heart of the temple. Only the high priest could do that, and only once a year. To use a slightly flippant illustration, in the movie *Fast and Furious 9*, the characters Tej and Roman go to space in a little souped-up, rocket-propelled Pontiac Fiero (by the ninth film, the writers had left realism far behind!). It

7 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (Harper One, 1954), p 23.

is a humorous scene. They are like, “No way man. How’d we get here? What are we doing here?” As Christians we should ask an even more astounding question: “How did we get access to the Most Holy Place? How is it that we can gather and have God be present among us and look forward to the day when we will be in the very presence of God?” Answer: Jesus. You have a better chance of going into space in a Pontiac Fiero than of getting into the Most Holy Place apart from Jesus!

Jesus gave us this access because he made a way “through the curtain” (Hebrews 10:20). This curtain is an allusion to the separation of the outer and inner rooms of the tabernacle/temple, pointing to a greater heavenly reality: a barrier one must pass to enter God’s presence. It has been opened through Christ’s atoning work on the cross, when the temple’s curtain was torn from top to bottom, giving access. Our confidence to enter God’s presence is not in our résumé, our status, or our religious efforts. It is due to Jesus’ finished work. And therefore, we want to gather; the liberated people of God want to exult in the grace of God together.

LET US DRAW NEAR TO GOD

So corporate worship should aim to exalt God, and this brings joy to God’s people. We go wrong when we aim for the second without majoring on the first; that is, we do not gather for entertainment but for exaltation. On one occasion, someone told the pastor Francis Chan that they did not like the worship service very much, to

which he quipped, “That’s ok—we weren’t worshipping you.” Cheeky, but true. It is always as we see Christ, and appreciate his love for us, that we will both be moved to worship him and given confidence that we can worship him. So our worship is to be done with “full assurance of faith” (Hebrews 10:22b). To get the most out of worship, remind yourself of what Christ has done for you and draw near with full assurance. Because of the work of Christ, you do not have to be tentative in worshipping God. In Christ, we are welcomed—so let us worship him in Spirit-empowered freedom and joy. Equally, the work of Christ means we worship *wholeheartedly*. The writer says that we should draw near to God “with a true heart” (v 22). A true or “sincere” heart is a heart that is in the right place. There is an important connection between truth and the heart. God does not want an empty-headed emotionalism (because truth matters). But God also does not want an empty-hearted intellectualism (because the heart matters). So we are to draw near *sincerely* and *passionately*. Our gatherings should be full of truth and of joy.

EVERYONE WORSHIPS

The privilege of worshipping God because of what Christ has done on our behalf actually answers the great question that every human is (subconsciously, often) asking: *who will I worship?* Everyone worships something or someone. The American writer David Foster Wallace, himself by no means a Christian, once said in a commencement speech at Kenyon College:

*Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of god ... to worship ... is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough, never feel you have enough. It's the truth. Worship your own body and beauty and sexual allure, and you will always feel ugly. And when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before [your loved ones] finally plant you ... Worship power, and you will end up feeling weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to numb you to your own fear. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart, you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. Look, the insidious thing about these forms of worship is not that they are evil or sinful; it is that they're unconscious. They are default settings.*⁸

Our default setting is that we are wired for worship. Not only that, but we are wired for community (which is why there is something so compelling about being in the crowd at a sports game or being part of a political rally—there is an object of worship, and we are worshipping in community⁹).

8 David Foster Wallace, "This Is Water," quoted in Micah Fries, *Exalting Jesus in Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi* (Nashville: B&H, 2015), p 50.

9 This is not at all to say that enjoying attending a sports game or political meeting is by definition wrong or idolatrous. But look around you at these events—plenty of people are making a "god" out of a leader they look to to make everything right, or

The truth is that our hearts will never be satisfied until we come to know and worship the God who made us. Worshiping him is an all-satisfying privilege. As the 5th-century church father Augustine prayed, “You stir man to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”¹⁰ And so, when we praise God in community—in the gathering—we are doing what we are made for: worshiping in community. We are saved into a community, and the gathering makes our identity with the family of God visible and delightful. God did not save us so that we could go to heaven as individuals, apart from each other, but as individuals who are part of a holy community. Christianity is personal, but it is not individualistic.

LET US HOLD FAST TO OUR CONFESSION OF HOPE

Sandwiched between the exhortations to draw near to God and to consider how we may stir up one another is this exhortation: “Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful” (Hebrews 10:23). In other words, in light of what Jesus has done, *persevere in hope*.

The New Testament’s understanding of *hope* is not wishful thinking, but rather, settled confidence centered

a sports team they look to for identity and victory.

¹⁰ Augustine, *Confessions*. Translated with an Introduction and Notes by Henry Chadwick (Oxford University Press, 1991), p 3.

on the coming of Jesus. Christians are to persevere in hope with their eyes on Jesus (12:1-2). The “confession” in view is our public confession of the gospel, by which we are brought into that confident hope that Jesus will return to make all things new and that we will live with him. And when we suffer or are persecuted (as the recipients of Hebrews were being), we need to be reminded of our hope, grounded in the truth that God keeps his promises. One of the primary places where we are reminded of those promises of God, and where we are therefore refilled with gospel hope, is *in the assembly of God’s people*, as the gospel is sung, declared, and seen in baptism and in the Lord’s Supper.

Why attend the corporate gathering? *Because life is hard, and we need hope.* It is this hope that will inspire a life of faithfulness. We need the gathering so that we can press on in the face of difficulties. We do not attend because we are better than others or have life sorted out, but as people in need of Jesus’ grace to forgive us as sinners and to strengthen us as sufferers. By attending the gathering, we are in a sense saying, “I need help. I need support. I need accountability. I need hope.”

We should never imagine that the believers who attend our gatherings are devoid of trials. Each week, I know I am surrounded by people who are dealing with things like miscarriages, failed adoptions, loss of jobs, terrible jobs, family conflicts, addictions, upcoming surgeries, anxiety, doubt, and more. And I bring my own trials and

disappointments and regrets in through the door, too. We need one another to persevere in hope. We need to hear our brothers and sisters sing; we need the prayers of God's people; we need to hear the gospel heralded; we need to taste and see that the Lord is good in the Lord's Supper; and we need to give and receive encouragement to and from other redeemed sinners and sufferers.

As Bonhoeffer reflected on the privilege of gathering with God's people, he wrote:

It is by the grace of God that a congregation is permitted to gather visibly in this world to share God's Word and sacrament. Not all Christians receive this blessing. The imprisoned, the sick, the scattered lonely, the proclaimers of the Gospel in heathen lands stand alone. They know that visible fellowship is a blessing ... The physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer ... The prisoner, the sick person, the Christian in exile sees in the companionship of a fellow Christian a physical sign of the gracious presence of the triune God ... It is grace, nothing but grace, that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brethren.¹¹

It is because of the kindness of God in Christ, and only because of that kindness, that you enjoy the privilege of worshiping God corporately as you gather as the redeemed people of God, en route to your heavenly home. It is

¹¹ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, p 18-19.

literally what you were made for—to enjoy worshipping God in the community of his people, in his presence.

ACTION STEPS

Of course there are times when you must miss a gathering due to sickness, work, being deployed for some kind of service, being on mission, or being vulnerable to disease. But ordinarily, we make every effort not just to be present at weekly worship but to make it special. How may we do this?

- *Get adequate sleep on Saturday night.* I know the appeal of movies, socializing, and sports on Saturdays, and I am not saying we should always avoid these pleasures. They can be sources of rest and enjoyment. However, if you were going to have a big meeting for work the next day, would you not do all you could to get sufficient rest the night before? If we truly believe that the Sunday gathering is the high point of the week, then we should prepare accordingly.
- *Read the sermon passage ahead of time.* Perhaps you can do this on Saturday night with your family; or on Sunday morning before heading out to church; or upon arrival at church. Reading ahead of the sermon will put you in a good frame of mind when it is time for the message.
- *Pray for your leaders.* Pray for their spiritual well-being. Pray for their families. Pray for the

conflicts they are dealing with. Pray for their faithfulness to God. Pray for their hearts to be enlarged for God's people. Pray for the Spirit to move mightily through them so that lives are changed.

- *Pray for fellow members and those visiting.* Pray that the gathering would be a means of instruction and encouragement to members. Pray that unbelievers would be drawn to Christ and become his followers. Pray for the kids in the church: that they would be captivated by Jesus at a young age and would follow him all their days in love and adoration.
- *Consider having some special traditions on Sundays.* Perhaps that is a meal with your family. Perhaps that involves inviting people over for a meal. Perhaps it is a family walk later in the day. Or perhaps it involves slowly reading through a good Christian book in the evening. Allow this day of worship to be a means of nourishing yourself for the week ahead.