**The Theology of the Church**

Class #6: The Church Gathered

**Introduction**

Opening illustration: my experience with flossing. Once I understood *why* I was supposed to do it (not just to clean, but to stimulate my gums) and once I experienced the consequences of not doing it well, I was able and motivated to do it much better.

Now make the challenging shift from flossing to church. I think the same holds true. We gather every week, just as Christians have presumably done every Sunday since Jesus rose from the dead. We gather because the Bible tells us to. Hebrews 10:24, “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.”

But as importance as faith-filled, blind obedience may be, and understanding of *why* we gather can help us do it better. So let me start by putting that to you as a question. *What is the purpose of our weekly gatherings as a church?*

That’s the question I want to explore more this morning as we look carefully at our gatherings as a church. I’m going to start by rehashing some of what we looked at last week in our class on congregationalism: that the church exists to guard the what and the who of the gospel. And then we’ll pull away three implications from that for the purpose of our weekly gatherings. So let’s dig in.

**The Church Guards the What and Who of the Gospel**

Last week we saw in Matthew 16 that the charter of the local church, given by Jesus, is to guard the “what” and the “who” of the gospel. The “what” seems pretty clear. As Paul writes in 2 Timothy 2:2, “what you have heard from me…entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.” The “who” is at first a bit opaque as Jesus entrusts the “keys” of the kingdom to the apostles. Then in Matthew 18 he passes those along to the congregation of each local church. The “keys” turn out to be the ability to declare who is and is not a Christian. Not that the church can *make* someone a Christian or *unmake* someone. But they have the authority to declare who fits that description.

What I didn’t say last week is how very different this view of the primary purpose of the church is from so many other purpose statements we might write for it. The church’s main purpose is *not* the Great Commandment. To be sure, the gospel life that emerges from a church that guards the what and who of the gospel will look like the Great Commandment to love one’s neighbor. But love is not the primary purpose. Neither is the church’s main purpose the Great Commission of Matthew 28. By guarding the “what” and “who” of the gospel, the church becomes God’s representative on earth. The community of the church is a display of God’s glory. And we want the whole earth to see that glory. But, to quote John Piper, “missions exists because worship doesn’t.” Worship—seeing and responding to who God is—is primary. Because God is primary. The ultimate purpose statement of any church is to be a display of God’s glory by guarding the what and the who of the gospel.

That means that things we’ve previously seen as of marginal importance—like Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, or church membership and church discipline—become huge in importance. Because that’s how the church protects the “who” of the gospel. That’s why men willingly gave themselves to be burned alive during the Protestant Reformation over issues like the ordinances. They saw how critical those things are to being a church.

As Christians, then, we need the local church. Not mainly as a place to hear teaching. Not mainly as a place to go on Sunday morning. Not mainly as a source of encouragement. It is all that, and all those things are related to it’s purpose. But we need the church in order to cling to the gospel. We need the church to remind us *what* the gospel is and to affirm that we continue as people of the gospel. That our lives match our profession.

But as we follow this strand of thought through the New Testament, we get an interesting twist. If the purpose of the local church is mainly about guarding the “what” and “who” of the gospel, you might think at first that regular meetings aren’t that important. After all, what matters most is what we believe and whether we live out those beliefs. And so what we care about mainly is teaching and relationships, right? If I start with Matthew 16 and construct from scratch what the local church is, I think I might come up with something kind of Baha’i-like. Where weekly gatherings don’t happen much, but people are very interested in relationships, in service, and in teaching.

That’s not what we see in the New Testament, though. We see that the regular assembly of the believers in a local church is really important. A regular assembly that quickly became weekly, on the first day of the week as a celebration of Jesus’s resurrection. It’s important because in those meetings we hear God’s word, so we can continue to remember and recognize the true gospel. And in those meetings we formally reaffirm our citizenship in the heaven thorough the ordinances.

Now, understanding the primary purpose of the church is crucial to understanding why we gather. So for the rest of our time I want to walk through three implications of the local church’s purpose statement—for our weekly gatherings.

**Implication #1: Our Gatherings Are Designed by God**

I mentioned a few minutes ago that every Christian needs a local church. Each of us is absolutely, vitally, in need of a local church that’s going to guard the what and who of the gospel. But not just any thing called a “church” will do. Someone may call a weekly hike in the woods a church because they assemble to commune with God in nature. But that’s not the church Jesus talks about in Matthew 16. Why not? Because God’s told us very specifically what a church should do—and walking in the woods didn’t make the list.

It’s like if your doctor told you that you need gene replacement therapy. What’s your next question to you? “Who do you recommend for gene replacement therapy?” Because you don’t want to settle for anything with that name. You want what he *intends* for you to have. What he thinks you need.

If it’s true that we need the church, we need the church that God intends for us. This brings us to something theologians call the “regulative” principle. When you ask the question, “what should the local church do when they gather” some people might answer, “anything not prohibited in Scripture.” That’s called the “normative” principle. But a more biblical way to answer that question is, “only what God has told us to do in the local church.” We want to follow God’s prescription, so to speak.

What is his prescription? In the New Testament, we see commands for the church to pray (Col 4:2-4, 1 Tim 2:1-2), to read Scripture publicly (1 Tim. 4:13; Col. 4:15, 16), to listen to preaching and teaching (Acts 2:42; 1 Tim. 4:13), to baptize believers (Matt 28:19) and share the Lord’s supper (Acts 2:42; 1 Cor. 11); to encourage each other and praise God in song (Eph. 5:19, Heb 13:15), and to give of their finances (1 Cor 16:1-2). 1 Cor 14:26 is clear: every one of these things that we do together, must be done “for the strengthening of the church” – to edify others. Quoting Lig Duncan, the warrant for a church to do something in its main weekly service “can come in the form of explicit directives, implicit requirements, the general principles of Scripture, positive commands, examples, and things derived from good and necessary consequence” (*Give Praise to God*, 23). In summary, we pray the Bible, read the Bible, preach the Bible, sing the Bible, and see the Bible—in the form of the ordinances.

But if something doesn’t make that list, it’s not part of God’s plan for our time together. A hike in the woods may be a wonderfully God-glorifying way to spend time. It may lead you to worship. But it’s not what we should do when the local church gathers.

To explore this idea more, let me give you three reasons why we should follow this “regulative principle” in our church gatherings:

1. We do not have warrant to bind a Christian’s conscience in ways Scripture doesn’t. Because Christians are *commanded* to be at church regularly (Hebrews 10:25), we need to be careful what we do in that setting in ways we don’t in other areas. We might have an optional church picnic where we play volleyball. But shifting volleyball into our Sunday morning gathering suddenly shifts it from something someone *may* participate in into something they *must* participate in. And we have no right to do that. Just like as much as you may think that it is wise to abstain from alcohol, you wouldn’t put that in our church covenant—because they you’re commanding someone to do something that Scripture doesn’t.
2. God knows how to worship him better than we do. When you begin to understand the regulative principle, you begin to get a sense for the conceit of *not* operating that way. Who’s to say that we know how to worship God better than he does himself? That’s the whole point behind the second commend in the Ten Commandments. “Do not make a graven image.” I might think that making an image of God would help me worship him. “Oh no,” God says. That’s not how I want to be worshiped. Did the Israelites mean well when they cast an image of their God in the form of a calf? Perhaps. Perhaps they wanted to make him more concrete so they could worship him better. Did that work out well. Nope. Did Nadab and Abihu have good intentions when they offered unauthorized fire before the Lord in Leviticus 10? Perhaps. But their instant annihilation is a sobering reminder that God’s commands are not to be trifled with.
3. The Holy Spirit has good reasons for designing our gatherings as he has. Why limit ourselves to the elements I mentioned earlier? Prayer, reading Scripture, preaching, ordinances, singing, and giving? Well, I don’t know. But he sure has things figured out better than I do. I think I’ll trust him on this one.

Now, as you can see in the diversity of worship styles at different faithful churches, these elements are not terribly restrictive. And Christians can sometimes disagree on what is prescribed in Scripture and what is not. But even when we disagree, at least we can know we’re using the same framework and the same goal. To embrace only those elements in our weekly gatherings that are prescribed for us in Scripture.

Now, if you’re planning the services of your church, this has some very practical relevance for you. But very few of us are in that situation. So let me draw out three take-aways to consider from what I’ve just said.

1. Hopefully this will give you a good framework for figuring out how to evaluate a church’s services if someday you need to find a new church. Look for a church that takes seriously their responsibility to follow God’s prescription for their main weekly gathering.
2. This should reorient how we evaluate our own church’s service. Instead of simply thinking, “how did I feel coming out of that service” or “what did I get out of the sermon,” we can be a little more God-focused. “Did what happened this morning please him? Did it accomplish his purposes for our time together?” I suspect that we all know that the service should be about him and not about us. But listen in on our conversation afterward with our spouse or our friends or inside our head and things often sound very different.
3. Recognize that the Holy Spirit gave us all these elements because we *need* all these elements. Do you find that you love sermons but don’t really appreciate the prayers? Or you’re all about the singing but don’t have much patience for the readings? We can each grow in our appreciation for all the elements of a church service that Scripture gives us.

[if time] *Which would be a great thing for us to do right now. How have you grown in your appreciation for different aspects of a church service in the years since your conversion?*

*Questions?*

Now, I’ve been focused very narrowly on worship as a corporate, Sunday morning, church activity. But of course we all know that worship in a Romans 12:1 sense is much broader than that. Which begs the question, what’s so special about *corporate* worship? And that’s a question we can answer with a second implication from a church existing to guard the who and what of the gospel.

**Implication #2: God has special purposes for corporate worship**

To really get at this, I think we need to begin by defining what worship is. I like David Peterson’s definition: Worship is “engaging with God on the terms that he proposes and in the way that he alone makes possible.” It is response to who he is. It is the working out of Jesus’s words in John 16:14, “[The Spirit] will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you.”

It’s important to recognize three characteristics about worship:

* It is a response to God himself. Worship is a right and natural amazement at the glory of who God is.
* It encompasses our entire lives. Our daily activity can *be* worship—in as much as it is our response to who he is. And it can lead us *into* worship by teaching us the glory of who God is. So at work I might find in being a good boss a bit of a taste of how much God loves using his authority for our good. That can lead me into worship as it helps me appreciate in a way I never did before how amazing and delightful God is. And then as I respond to such a good God by trying to represent his authority well as a boss, my job becomes worship.
* It is a delight in the beauty of God in Christ. The word *worship* too often connotes nothing more than the emotions we experience when we sign about God. But we may be more caught up in the experience than in God. Instead of worship being a delight in an experience, it is delight in God.

But while all of life can be worship, and all of life can lead us into worship, we’re talking about something much narrower than that when we look at corporate worship. By which I mean, the main weekly gathering of a local church that all believers are commanded to be part of.

So what’s so special about corporate worship? What happens there that doesn’t happen when you pray, sing, read, and listen to a sermon at home? Let me give you an answer in three pieces:

1. We hear a trustworthy message. In a sense, at least over the long haul, the message that a church proclaims—in its preaching, its songs, its prayers, its readings—is only as good as the lives in that church. Gospel-transformed lives will cherish gospel-transformed preaching. So when you get to know the people in a church, you can have much greater confidence in the fidelity of their message. This is the “who” and “what” of the gospel working together.
2. We worship *together*. That means that corporate worship is a show of unity. Think of all the hundreds of sacrifices that need to be made for this to happen. Sacrificing preferences in musical style, in service time, in service length, in caring for children. And the unity that those sacrifices produce. How pleasing that must be to God!
3. The ordinances. Remember how I told you the ordinances are more important than we often given them credit for? Well, they are the structure around which gospel community forms. We don’t have the relational work of the community in our services per se. After all, we don’t gather at 10:30 on Sunday to chat for two hours. But that community is showcased in the ordinances—and the ordinances form the boundary conditions that true gospel community needs to form.

God is exalted as his true gospel is proclaimed. God is exalted as the unity of a diverse congregation is seen in their assembling together. God is exalted as the gospel people his Word has created are revealed through baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Compared to that, singing songs to God on your commute to work seems so one-dimensional! Corporate worship is special because of how both the what and the who of the gospel come together to create a tapestry of worship that is so much more profound and complex than any of us could ever do by ourselves.

So what should we do with this? Well, hopefully understanding God’s purposes for corporate worship will make us prioritize it a bit more. Let’s say you’re on vacation, so you just do an extra-long quiet time on Sunday morning to make up for the fact that you’re not in church. Now, there’s nothing wrong that that. Nowhere in Scripture does it say you need to be in your own church 52 weeks a year. But any suggestion that your long quiet time is in any way similar to being in church totally misses the point! It’s a very people-centered view of things, for one. As if church is only important because of the spiritual nourishment I get out of it. And that I can give myself a quick “church substitute” to get me through the week. But beyond that, it misunderstands all the ways in which a church service honors God that I can never accomplish on my own.

A church guards the what and who of the gospel *in order* to showcase the glory of Almighty God in their life together. And in doing so, they are able to sound a note of worship far more profound than any of us can accomplish on our own. That’s our second implication.

*Any questions?*

We just answered the question, “how is a church service different from a quiet time?” And you may have noticed that all the answers I gave were vertical in nature. How we worship God differently together than apart. But if you’re familiar with the New Testament’s teaching on the local church, you’ll notice that I left out a big part of that answer, which is our third implication. The church gathered is about horizontal relationships between us as well.

**Implication #3: The Church Gathers for Edification**

1 Corinthians 14:26 is an interesting an unexpected verse about our corporate gatherings. Here’s what Paul writes:

“What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up.”

It’s easy to think that church should just be about God. That church services should be just about praising God. But if the purpose of the church is to guard the “what” and “who” of the gospel, then that view is too limiting. Which is what Paul is getting to here in 1 Corinthians. As he sees it, edification is a key reason why we gather together each week. And that means that we gather not merely on a vertical dimension—speaking to God—but on a horizontal dimension—speaking to each other. As Paul writes to the Ephesians, “Speak to *one another* with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the *Lord”* (Eph. 5:19).

That’s why we have hymns that are addressed to ourselves and not just to God. That’s why we read Scripture aloud. That’s why we have responsive and antiphonal readings to each other. That’s why we keep the lights on instead of dimming them down as if the only thing important is what you say in your heart to each other. That’s why—though it wasn’t designed with this in mind—it’s kind of nice that our seating space is designed in a circular arrangement. So we can see each other as we gather.

Well, if this is one of the purposes for our main weekly gathering, I would assume it should affect *how* we gather—in terms of our attitude and what we do when we gather. But let me put that out as a question for you. *What are some of the implications of this idea that we gather in part in order to speak to each other? [think about how the truths we sing/hear/read apply to both you and others; don’t be distracting; sing loud so we can hear each other; strive to blend in; listen to others; etc.]*

**Conclusion**

When we come together on Sunday morning, we get a glimpse of the glory of God’s final congregation in heaven. For many of us, that’s when heaven feels most real, and we esteem the things of God as most valuable. And we need that picture, don’t we! We need that picture because, despite the brokenness of the world around us, we are built for heaven. So thank God that he’s given us this weekly reminder of our eternal destiny. Let’s add that to all of the things we can praise him for as we go upstairs to join in this picture of heaven in a few minutes.