

## 5G: Gathering Sunday, 9/11/22

Don't you hate it when you realize you don't have any cellular bars and there isn't a wi-fi network within range? Here's how that usually plays out for me. I use Google maps on my phone to navigate to a remote State Park, and all is fine until I get back into the car and ask for directions home. And that's when I realize there isn't any cellular service down deep in the river valley I'm in, somewhere in the middle of nowhere. I have to start my journey home the old-fashioned way, using road signs and a paper map, until I happen upon the next cellular tower.

Most of us depend on our phones these days for a great many more things than just making phone calls. Texting, emailing, social media apps, navigation, restaurant menus, banking, movies, and games are just a few of the things that more and more people do on their mobile phones. And unless you've downloaded the content ahead of time, chances are that when you're cut off from a strong cellular or wi-fi signal, then you either have to wait until it's been restored or figure out another way to accomplish what you're trying to do.

It turns out that we've all been created for a spiritual connectedness that we need for healthy living in community. Unlike your mobile device, there aren't any bars on a display to tell you how good your connection is with God and with other people. But our need for a strong spiritual connection is profoundly greater than our need for a good cellular connection. The joy and sense of belonging that we all long for, and the clarity of purpose, require us to intentionally grow in at least five ways that strengthen the spiritual signal that connects us with God and God's people.

Why, when, and how we should gather as the church has increasingly come into public discourse since Zoom became a verb that we regularly use. The Scriptures make it clear that we should be gathering but are understandably silent on most of the other details. In our first reading, the author of Hebrews writes this unambiguous exhortation: "And let us not neglect our meeting together as some people do."<sup>1</sup> So apparently this is not exactly a modern phenomenon. Over the entire two thousand years that the Christian Church has been in existence, we've been asking the same questions. Why, when, and how we should gather

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<sup>1</sup> Hebrews 10:25. New Living Translation (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition)

as the church?

I've spoken with many people who say something like, "I believe in God, I just don't believe in going to church." Most recently, I heard this: "I believe in God, but I don't believe in the institution of the Church."

It's very true that our worship of God is something that needs to be expressed in our daily lives, outside of the church building and in the communities we live and work and play in. But for so many other reasons, the idea that we don't need to regularly show up, participate with and invest our lives in a community of faith is tragically flawed. We still need a place to gather, even if the days of the old white church on the hill may be over.

The most convincing argument for that is found in Hebrews 10:24: "Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works."<sup>2</sup> It's those two words, "one another," that are at the heart of the matter. Repeatedly, the Bible paints a picture of us being connected with other people- one another- because "love" is something best experienced with two or more people, whether it's in offering or receiving a welcome, teaching, stirring each other up, bearing each other's burdens, serving each other, learning to live in harmony, offering and receiving forgiveness, receiving and giving comfort, praying, or encouraging. We gather with one another so that we can give and receive the kind of love that's only possible in the name and presence of the Spirit of Jesus.

Sometimes, of course, we simply can't be physically present with the Body of Christ. But when we choose not to be, we are choosing not to be there for "one another." In fact, in a way, our intentional absence is a decision to simply not be "one another," because we can't be "one another" when we don't gather to share the same experiences together.

Our need to gather is about more than growing our connection with "one another." Gathering is also about growing our connection with God. The author of Hebrews is equally clear about that, writing: "Let us go right into the presence of God with sincere hearts fully trusting him. For our guilty consciences have been sprinkled with Christ's blood to make us clean, and our bodies have been washed with pure water. Let us hold tightly without wavering to the hope we affirm, for God can be trusted to keep his promise."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Hebrews 10:24. Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Hebrews 10:22-23. Ibid

Promises and trust are inherently relational concepts. In this case, we're talking about God's promises to us and our trust of God. When we gather at a regular time on a regular basis as the Church, we set aside a portion of our lives to hear God's promises spoken from the Word, to experience the movement of God's Spirit in the music and the silences, and to grow in our knowledge and trust of the one who calls us children. Can you accomplish these things on your own? Perhaps, in a limited way, but the truth is that many of us don't have the required discipline to be intentional in seeking God in all these ways on our own. Besides, the Scriptures teach us that God is present in a unique way whenever two or more are gathered in the name of Jesus.<sup>4</sup>

What does it look like when God's people gather? There's a wonderful variety of times, places, and methods for Christians to gather, but one of the most wonderful depictions of Christian gathering is contained in Acts, after God poured out the Holy Spirit and gave birth to the Church. Let's read that now. I'm in Acts 2, beginning with verse 36, in the New Living Translation. [{Read Acts 2:36-45, NLT}](#)

Teaching, fellowship, shared meals, and prayer. That sounds familiar, doesn't it? Granted, I've never seen 3,000 respond to one of my altar calls, but isn't that essentially what we still do when we gather on Sunday mornings? Are there other teachers of the Bible out there besides me? Thousands. Perhaps tens of thousands or even hundreds of thousands. Does Caribou have better Coffee than we do? Almost certainly. Annika here will even serve you a latte with that wonderful smile on her face. But there's nowhere other than the Church where you can show up and expect to share the Biblical teaching, fellowship, shared meals, and prayer that God orchestrates through the unique combination of our varied gifts and the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit. We don't show up here for the coffee, for the sermon, for the prayer, or even for the Rice Crispy bars. We show up to strengthen the connection with God and with God's people that we desperately need to be whole and healthy people.

The Church is an imperfect institution made up of imperfect people. But somehow God meets us where we are and makes all those "one another" things happen in a way that doesn't happen at even the best coffee shop in town.

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew 18:20.

I've always loved campfires. I love the warmth of the fire, the yellows, oranges, and reds of the flames and the hissing, popping, and crackling of the wood. Gathering with other people to be the Church is kind of like gathering around a campfire. You may have learned in school that fire comes from a chemical reaction involving the wood, the air, and heat. The fire will burn indefinitely provided those three things are present in abundance. But kick one of those embers out of the fire ring, and what happens? It loses the heat it needs, and the fire dies, long before the fuel runs out.

When we gather as the church, we gather in the presence of the Holy Spirit to have our hope and joy ignited for the journey ahead in the remaining 167 hours of the upcoming week. There's something about doing this together that seems to matter, to both God and to us, and God honors and blesses our presence, fanning the flames of our hearts. Just like an ember that's taken out the fire, we need to gather as the Church to experience the presence of the living God in ways we simply can't when we're alone or distracted by the routines of our daily living.

I confess that I struggle somewhat with streaming worship. On the one hand, I love that it allows people to join us who would otherwise not be able to do so. If you're one of those people, I'm so glad you're online.

But I'm also increasingly mindful that Christianity is, at its heart, incarnational. Incarnation is when spirit is made into flesh. The savior we worship and follow is Jesus, who is spirit made flesh. Just as Jesus decided to come to earth in person, I suspect that when show up to be the church, in person, there's a level of engagement and growth that's more of a multidimensional community interaction than what we can experience with a flat screen. That's why we ask our members to promise to be present in worship and other significant times in the life of our church as a matter of priority. That's why I'm asking every one of you to grow this year in your level of gathering. If you haven't been in the church building in a while and you're able to do so, then take a step up and see what you've been missing, because we've been missing you!

When you walked into church this morning, did you realize that in doing so you were walking in the footsteps of Jesus, making into flesh that thing we are made into when we gather, the body of Christ? There would be no Christmas, no Easter, no forgiveness of our

sins, and no church, if Jesus hadn't shown up and given us the gift of his presence. When we gather to serve Jesus, we're bringing all our attitudes and experiences, our hopes and griefs together, and putting flesh on them. When you show up it matters- to God, to the others gathered here, and to the world you'll return to after this hour is over.

Please take some time now to reflect on your ability and commitment to gather with the people of the Church. If you can't gather with us in person, how else might you strengthen your connections with God and the Body of Christ for the sake of the "One Another's?"



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