

## What is Lost When We Do Not *Gather* for Worship

August 2020

### Intro: *Opportunity Costs*

(Hebrews 10:19–25)<sup>19</sup> *Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus,* <sup>20</sup> *by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh,* <sup>21</sup> *and since we have a great priest over the house of God,* <sup>22</sup> *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.* <sup>23</sup> *Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.* <sup>24</sup> *And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works,* <sup>25</sup> *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.*

### Introduction:

- We have unwittingly painted ourselves into a corner. In the name of pragmatism, relevance and expediency, we have adopted forms of worship foreign to holy scripture. And now the “law of unintended consequences” has kicked in and we are having to eat the bitter fruit of the seeds we’ve sown.
  - o Can’t make it to church? No problem, you can live-stream.
  - o Too many people for only one preaching pastor? No problem. Just get people into multiple venues around the city and we will pipe-in the sermon ***via video***.
  - o Face-to-face praying together, singing together and communing together are nice additions when possible, ***but they are not necessary for true worship***.
- Definition: Gnosticism – an early church heresy that elevated the mind/thoughts over the body/matter; the belief that salvation was obtained by a higher consciousness or knowledge (gnosis) and culminated in the release of the soul from its prison-house body.
- Today, as usual, ***we (the modern church) are the problem***. We have unknowingly capitulated to the gnostic spirit of our age. Our worship services too often affirm the pious sounding view that, “My body exists as a machine to carry around my brain, and my thoughts are the only truly important part of my worship.” I.e. Thinking right thoughts, regardless of how those thoughts, are, or are not, expressed in my life, is the only ***vital*** component of my religion.” And so, we currently have worship services that are gnostic enough to (wait for it) be ***easily*** conducted on Zoom. Gather your family around the TV monitor, listen to a sermon, think right thoughts and we’ll call it ***worship***.
- But wait, it’s even worse than that. ***We have even begun to acquire a taste for this gnostic mode of worship***. “Fruit has to be tinned if it is to be transported,” C. S. Lewis once wrote, “and has to lose thereby some of its good qualities. But one meets people who have actually learned to prefer the tinned fruit to the fresh.”
  - o I used to say that Zoom worship was like, “Kissing your wife through a screen door.” ***But, actually, it’s more akin to Facetiming your honeymoon***.
  - o That which God intends to be intensely personal, incarnational, participatory and “face to face” has been reduced to thinking right thoughts while viewing two-dimensional images accompanied by digitized audio.
  - o ***None of which*** fits the picture of worship given to us in Hebrews 10.

- Worse still, the magistrate, having assumed the power to regulate when and where we can meet, has now assumed the right to determine what is, and what is not, essential for our worship:
  - o We've been watching you worship via video for years.
  - o So, Zoom (It's video!)
  - o And if you absolutely must – drive-in services (but stay in your cars!)
- So, where did the magistrate get that idea? Where did the magistrate get the idea that incarnational, personal, participatory, face-to-face worship was optional? **From us**; from the modern, increasingly gnostic, church. **We** gave them that idea by not insisting that words, water, bread and wine (**all** of them) ministered to the gathered people of God, are **absolutely necessary** for the right worship the living God; and that He is to be loved and adored with all of our heart, mind and **strength**, i.e. with the entirety of our being, bodies included, not just with our **thoughts**.
  - o NOTE: that is why our service is filled with bodily worship, sitting, standing, kneeling, singing, raising hands, passing the peace via hugs and handshakes and taking actual bread and wine in hand as we commune together. We are exercising the entirety of beings in worship so that we can follow Jesus, not just with our hearts and minds, but **with our bodies as well** as we move through our weeks.
    - Note: Many of the early gnostics were openly licentious/promiscuous. Why? Because the body, and what was done with the body, simply didn't matter; it didn't count; it wasn't of eternal significance.
  - o **And to be clear, I am absolutely committed to, and heartily champion the benefits of God's Word, read, sung and preached.** We are to be, as Paul wrote, "transformed by the renewing of our minds." Yes, and amen! I'm just leaning hard against the notion that this transformation can be done well (or at all) in a vacuum, isolated from the rest of our being.

## Observations

- Resist the temptation to apply this to your quiet times before understanding what it says about our corporate worship.
- These exhortations (drawing near to God) do not apply **only** to corporate worship, but from the language used, they must apply **firstly** to corporate worship. Look at how these words and phrases point to **corporate Temple** worship.
  - o "holy places" (v19)
  - o "through the curtain" - the veil separating the holy place from the holy-of-holies (v20)
  - o "a great priest over the house of God" (v21)
  - o "let **us** draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith..." (v22)
  - o "with **our** hearts sprinkled clean..." (v22)
  - o "with **our** bodies washed with water" (v22)
  - o "let **us** hold fast the confession of our hope..." (v23)
  - o "let **us** consider how to stir up **one another** to love and good works" (v24)
  - o "not neglecting to meet **together**" (v25)
  - o **All allusions to corporate Temple worship in the time when Hebrews was written**

- But, at the same time, **not** referring explicitly to OT Temple worship
  - <sup>19</sup> *Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus,<sup>20</sup> by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh,<sup>21</sup> and since we have a great priest over the house of God,*
    - “holy places” (God’s immediate presence)
    - “by the blood of Jesus”
    - “by the new and living way that Jesus opened for us through the curtain”
    - With **Jesus** as our sympathetic great priest (Jesus), who knows our weakness and lives forever to make intercession for us.
  - As the author does in all of this book, he sees continuity between the Old and New Covenants; with Jesus Christ **fulfilling**, not negating, abolishing or setting aside the Old Covenant.

### **Two Questions:**

- **One:** Why is the author of Hebrews so concerned about Christians **gathering** for worship? He seems grieved by the notion that some had already stopped gathering regularly for worship. Or to put it another way...
- **Two:** What is lost when we do not gather for worship?
  
- The embodying; the living out of our name/essence: **Ecclesia**
  - Definition: “a gathering of citizens called out from their homes into some public place, an assembly”
  - And so, says the author of Hebrews, we are not to “neglect to meet together.”
    - I.e. **don’t fail to be who you are in practice what you are in essence**: the people of God called out of the world in order **to gather** to worship the Father, in the name of the Son by the power of the Holy Spirit.
  - As always, “Identity precedes duty.”
  - We are to work out what God has already worked in.
    - The greatest command: Love
    - Rejoice always: Joy
    - Do not be anxious for anything: Peace
      - Do we see a pattern here?
  
- **Public confession of our faith**
  - “Let us hold fast the **confession** of our hope without wavering” (v23)
    - Definition: Profession, i.e. saying out loud what we believe.
  - (1 Timothy 6:12)<sup>12</sup> *Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good **confession** in the **presence of many witnesses**.*
  - That is one reason we sing hymns and psalms together. And that is why we together sing/recite a creed each week. We do so first and foremost as acts of worship; to praise the God that we love, reverence and adore. But we also do so to publicly confess/profess the truths that we hold dear; to go on record regarding what we believe. Why?

- As the overflow of our hearts. (Luke 6)
  - We sing and recite the greatness of our God revealed in Jesus, because we believe that if we didn't the stones beneath our feet would start to shout and sing.
- As a rudder to direct the ship of our souls. (James 3)

- **Face to face fellowship**

(2 John 12) *Though I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink. Instead I hope to come to you and **talk face to face**, so that our joy may be complete.*

- NOTE: John much preferred "face to face" to his era's high tech medium (paper and ink, that could be copied and distributed).
  - Why did John prefer "face to face"?: ***For the perfection of joy***.
    - I.e. High tech, however well it is used, diminishes the joy of the redeemed.
- Zoom meetings and masks...
- Diminish the clarity and effectiveness of our verbal communications
  - "stir up (***incite***) one another to love and good deeds" (v24)
  - "encourage (***call to one's side***) one another all the more..." (v25)
  - As Paul wrote:
    - "speak words that buildup one another"
    - "console one another"
- Masks impede the dynamism of our responses to one another in conversation.
- Zoom precludes our ability (as Paul commanded us) to "weep with those who weep, and rejoice with those who rejoice"
  - Via sympathetic facial expressions
  - Nearness, touch and prayer
- ***E.g. the first Sunday we met after a month of Zoom meetings.***

- **Holy kisses**

(2 Corinthians 13:12) *Greet one another with a **holy kiss**.*

(Romans 16:16) *Greet one another with a **holy kiss**. All the churches of Christ greet you.*

(1 Corinthians 16:20) *All the brothers send you greetings. Greet one another with a **holy kiss**.*

(1 Thessalonians 5:26) *Greet all the brothers with a **holy kiss**.*

(1 Peter 5:14) *Greet one another with the **kiss of love**. Peace to all of you who are in Christ.*

- Commanded, not optional
  - Our excuses:
    - Not my thing...
    - Too awkward...
  - Think about Paul's day: Rich and poor, free and slave, Greek and Jew, male and female.
- A "holy" kiss
  - (John Piper) "...what Paul and Peter are making plain here is to stress that the ordinary kiss — and it is just an ordinary word for kiss — should be made holy by the Christian church rather than being abandoned. So there is a lesson here for us. He says "a holy kiss." Kissing is not uniquely Christian. It is not a uniquely Christian affection. And what the apostles

say is: Take it from the world and sanctify it. Make it holy. Devote it to God. Make it say something about the Holy One. Include God in your hearts and in your thoughts when you greet one another with this ordinary, culturally common greeting.”

- Modern day equivalent:
  - Warm handshakes
  - Hugs, side-hugs and bro-hugs
  - Lingering touch
  - ***And all with the utmost care, propriety, sensitivity and discretion (2X)***
  
- Think about how often Jesus used touch and close proximity in his ministry
  - Firstly, with his incarnation (‘nuff said...)
  - Peter’s mother-in-law
  - Lepers
  - Reclining at dinner with his disciples
  - Jairus’ daughter: ***“Taking her by the hand, he said to her, “Talitha cumi”*** (Mark 5:41)
  - Thought Experiment: Imagine how much of the Gospels would be cut out if you removed the passages where Jesus was not ministering according to present Covid19 protocols.
    - Pressed by the crowds.
    - Seated at table with sinners
    - Touching people as he healed them
    - Pulling little children into his lap to bless them
    - Dining/reclining with his disciples
  - So, there goes 1 John 2:5-6
    - (1 John 2:5) *By this we may know that we are in him:<sup>6</sup> whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.* (well, except in times of a pandemic)

- **Singing with/to/for one another**

- ***With***: as a choir in spiritual warfare
  - Jehoshaphat’s choir leading the army into battle
  - The king did ***not*** send a soloist, duet, trio, quartet, quintet or even an octet ahead of the army that day.
    - He sent a host of singers into battle singing the praises of Yahweh full volume ***with the glory turned up to eleven.***
  
- ***To*** one another
  - According to Paul’s letters to the Ephesians and Colossians
  - To put God’s Word into one another

(Colossians 3:16)<sup>16</sup> *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing **one another** in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.*

- ***For***: Bear one another’s burdens

- E.g Jerry Sitzer (*A Grace Disguised*) singing for a brother who could not sing

- **Administration of the Sacraments**

- According to the Great Commission, the nations will be disciplined by Word and sacrament.
- Baptism
  - A little tricky in cars
  - **Impossible** via Zoom
- Feasting in the Lord's presence
  - A little tricky in cars
  - **Impossible** via Zoom
  - Pastor's meeting:
    - Let my people go – to serve me – **by feasting before Me**
  - Exodus 24
    - Word
    - Confession
    - Blood
    - Meal in Yahweh's presence (Moses, Aaron, sons, 70 elders)
  - Order of the three sacrifices: Sin – Wholly Ascended – Peace
  - Jesus to his disciples:

(Luke 22:14–15)<sup>14</sup> *And when the hour came, he reclined at table, and the apostles with him.* <sup>15</sup> *And he said to them, "I have **earnestly desired** to eat this Passover with you before I suffer.*

- Literally, "With desire I have desired..."
- I hope you come desiring the bread and wine of the Lord's Table.
- But know this, Jesus desires it more.
  - Imagine going over to your parents for Thanksgiving dinner and a few minutes before sitting down together you announce, "Yeah, I'm taking off now. Great talking to you. But I need to go home and finish this series I'm watching on Netflix. But thanks for your hard work in the kitchen." (Would your mom say, "No prob. Go ahead. I completely understand. We'll see you another time.")

- **Corporate Prayer**

- Matthew 6
  - "Pray **ye...**" (you plural – thank you King Jimmy version)
  - "**Our** father..."
  - "Give **us** this day **our** daily bread"
  - "Forgive **us our** trespasses"
  - "As **we** forgive those who trespass against **us**"
- Acts 2
  - "They devoted themselves to...**the prayers**"
  - "And all who believed **were together...**"
  - "And day by day **attending the temple together...**"

- Our prayers are written **to lead you in prayer**, not simply to passively listen to. You should be praying with the prayer, adding to, and adding your “amens” as he leads us in prayer.

(Acts 12:5) *So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.*

- **Receiving Jesus**

- It would be impossible to overstate how deeply, intensely and personally Jesus identifies with his body; his church.
- When Jesus confronted Saul on the road to Damascus, his question was, “Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou **me**?”
- And to his own disciples he said:

(Matthew 10:40)<sup>40</sup> *“Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me.*

- The passing of the peace
  - Our peace is intensely personal; it is a person (Jesus)
    - Paul says of Jesus, (Ephesians 2:14) *For **he himself is our peace**, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility*
  - So, in the passing of the peace
    - We receive Jesus (by receiving his own)
    - And we give Jesus to one another in our “The peace of the Lord (Jesus) be with you.”

- **Reading, Singing and Preaching the Word That Shakes the Shakable Things (Heb. 12)**

- *“Ye are **come** unto Mount Zion...”*
  - Ye (plural)
  - Are come (gathered)
  - On Mt. Zion
    - City of the Living God
    - The heavenly Jerusalem
    - Innumerable company of angels
    - Church of the firstborn (Jesus)
    - God, the Judge of all
    - Spirits of just men made perfect
    - A divine word that shakes what can be shaken (and removed)
    - So that those things which cannot be shaken may remain
    - How can we bear all this?
      - Because Jesus our mediator is at hand, with his blood of sprinkling which speaks of better things than Abel’s blood.

### Application:

- Pray that the modern church will lose its taste for gnostic worship; worship devoid of, or at least skinny on:
  - o The physical gathering of God's people
  - o Public confessions of faith
  - o Face to face encouragements and provoking one another to love and good deeds
  - o Holy, physical demonstrations of love and affection
  - o Singing with, to and for one another
  - o The water of baptism and the bread and wine of the Lord's Table
  - o Receiving Jesus in one another
  - o Pray that the modern church will, as Lewis put it, ***lose its taste for tinned fruit, or not even acquire it to begin with!***
- For God's grace and protection as we meet outdoors.
- For God to provide a place for us to meet ***indoors*** in inclement weather.
  - o At King's Cross, we've been happy to rent
    - But we didn't see how this might someday make it very difficult for us to meet and worship in the ways prescribed in God's Word.
- That God would grant us a vision for the glory of our gatherings on Mt. Zion (Heb. 12)

(Adapted from an FB post by pastor Uri Brito) This morning I, and a few of my dearest and closest friends will be rioting against Satan's headquarters. Our rioting will consist of hearty singing, sincere confession of our sins, public displays of mutual love, hearing from God's revelation, and having a meal from heaven.

We will start at 10:00 AM and right at the beginning, we will gather and make a trip to the heavenly places led by angelic tour guides on a direct flight conducted by the Third Person of the Godhead. My understanding is that Jesus will meet us at the entrance gate and take us to the heavenly throne. He is going to offer us fairly specific blueprints so that when we go back home (earth), we can implement them strategically with our children and close friends.

I am fairly sure that the heaven-bound event won't last more than 90 minutes or so. Of course, we plan to stick around afterward and share war stories and describe any bruises acquired during the riot. So far, no one has been seriously injured. Still, some have come back confessing a greater need to be fervent to our Father in heaven, and others have confessed their rioting has been far from ideal. Anyway, we hope that you can join us before the throne of God. We expect to do some real damage on our foe's kingdom today.