

The Doctrine of the Church: The Gathering – Hebrews 10:19-25

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May 7, 2023

[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions, please contact Pastor Derek at dberry@calvarybaptistsc.church.]

Take your copy of God's Word and meet me in Hebrews 10:19-25...

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

Covid-19 changed the way that we do life. In 2020, now known as an infamous year, we were unexpectantly hurled into a worldwide pandemic. The whole world shut down, presumably to protect one another from a highly contagious virus that has claimed many lives. This led to almost all churches deciding for a season to meet digitally instead of in person. Thank God we live in an age with so many technological advances that allow us to remain connected, even amid a pandemic. Since then, we have slowly transitioned to some sense of normalcy. One of the benefits of living in California is that we could come together and meet outside sooner than many others in various regions of this country.

As stated earlier, Covid, and technology in general, have changed how we maneuver in our everyday lives. Many have realized, "You know what? I can work my job completely from home." I was talking to someone recently who works for a law firm, and he told me that a study showed that productivity increased when the employees in his company worked remotely. This is also advantageous for employees because there is no need to fight traffic or pay ridiculous gas prices. The movie industry has also altered its approach to the business. As a matter of fact, there was a short stint where many questioned whether the movie theatre business would even survive past the pandemic

or not. Disney Plus offers many new films directly on its streaming platform. So, you can pay \$30 and skip the lines and illegal taxation of the popcorn and drink prices at the movie theatre. HBO Max is a new streaming service that offers same-day streaming for all their new films. Covid has changed the way we do life.

But what about Church gathering? Not unlike businesses and the entertainment industry, many churches offered live streaming for their congregations. Although this was less than ideal, it was necessary with so many unanswered questions concerning this virus. But how should we view the physical assembling of the church today? Is streaming the future of the church? I'm here to humbly and emphatically state that streaming is not the church's future, nor should it be. It's so easy to take this approach with so many other facets of our lives becoming remote, from work to entertainment and even dining. Why not add church to that list? I believe the Holy Spirit, through the author of Hebrews, has something to say.

So, let's dive into the text. The book of Hebrews was written to a discouraged group of Jewish Christians considering abandoning Christianity for their former belief system. As they experienced severe persecution, they remembered that this opposition was never an issue when practicing Judaism. Therefore, the author, who remains anonymous, focuses on the superiority of Jesus and the covenant that he administers. Another primary motif of this epistle is the idea of drifting. He gives his audience a warning passage at the tail end of many Christ-exalting sections. For example,

Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. -Hebrews 2:1

For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end. -Hebrews 3:14

And then we're brought to our passage this morning, found in chapter 10. He starts off this passage with the word "therefore." Whenever you see the word therefore in the Bible, always ask the question, "What is it there for?" It's always pointing to the previous passages. In verses 1-18, the author divulges the reality of Christ as the true and better sacrifice. Those under the law in the Old Covenant were required to offer yearly sacrifices that were insufficient to remove sin; Christ's once-and-for-all sacrifice has indeed removed our sin and provided us with forgiveness.

Here are our points this morning:

1. *The gospel (Christ) vs. 19-21*
2. *Let us...draw near (confidence) vs. 22*

3. *Let us...hold fast (confession) vs. 23*
4. *Let us...consider one another (community) vs. 24*

This passage is a microcosm of what we find in many Pauline epistles. Although I don't believe Paul is the author of this particular letter. We see a shift from *doctrine* to *duty*. There's the theological foundation, IE, the gospel, and then the practical application. You can also refer to this as going from *creed* to *conduct*, *precept* to *practice*, or *instruction* to *exhortation*; you take your pick. Let's examine together this gospel foundation.

¹⁹ Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, ²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God...

The author uses language and concepts his audience would be very familiar with.

This is the gospel, ladies and gentlemen! This is the new and living way. This is the only usage of the Greek word for *new* in the entire New Testament. The word means "freshly slaughtered." The good news about our savior is that he was slaughtered for our transgressions, yet he is the living way. Now we can have the confidence to come before him. I recall my high school days. My assistant principal's secretary was a grumpy lady. She was constantly mean to us students for no apparent reason. Whenever I genuinely needed something, I was always gripped with fear. I remember I asked her for a pass to go home because I was sick, and for some reason, she denied me. The exact details escape me. But I remember my confidence when my mom showed up to school. This time, I approached her desk with great enthusiasm, knowing I had someone with me who was equal in age and authority. And you guessed it, she listened to my mom instantly, and I was given a pass. The difference with and without my mom when approaching this lady was night and day. We also have someone co-equal with God the Father going before us as we approach his throne. The difference is that our loving Father was the one who sent the Son. His desire is for us to approach him with confidence so that we may be known by him.

This is the gospel foundation. Let's now look at the implications of the gospel, IE, the three "Let us." We'll spend the most time on the last one.

2. *Let us...draw near (confidence) vs. 22*

²² 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.

The author continues this Old Covenant symbolic language that the original audience would have easily identified. Priests were continually consecrated- washing themselves and the sacred vessels in the basins of clean water, and blood was repeatedly sprinkled as a sign of cleaning. But in Ezekiel, we see the promise of a new type of cleansing that would not be merely external but rather internal.

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols, I will cleanse you. -Ezekiel 36:25

So, we no longer have a condemned evil conscience. We can rest easy in the fact that there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus. Even when there is clear sin in our lives, we can approach God with the confidence that we belong to him and that we have experienced true forgiveness. And our bodies have been washed with clean water; therefore, we no longer use our members as instruments of unrighteousness. This is the practical effect of the gospel we examined in verses 19-21. We have an internal transformation that manifests itself externally as well. Therefore, the author speaks of a genuine or sincere heart with pure and unmixed sincere love for God. I remember being in the gym with a friend in Houston whom I was seeking to disciple. I was attempting to teach him a story concerning Abraham and Leah. And he was shaking his head as if he was listening to me, but I knew I didn't have his undivided attention. So, I asked him, "Bro, what did I just say?" And I kid you not, he responded with, "You said something about Aaliyah, right?" Let us not be like my good friend. One who appears to shake their head and give the external responses we believe God desires without offering him undivided attention. The author highlights the importance of these believers perpetually coming before God in prayer that is "sincere and wholehearted, true and engaged." [1]

3. Let us...hold fast (confession) vs. 23

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.

This exhortation builds off the last one because if we draw near to God, we will become positioned to heed the command to preserve hope. Unlike the honest secularist, we as believers have a hope to hold fast to. *Bertrand Russell* expressed it this way in his book *A Free Man's Worship*:

...the laborers of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins... Only within the scaffolding of the truth, only

on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the souls habitation henceforth be safely built.

Aren't you glad you don't have to be subjected to such a hopeless future? The biblical word for hope carries a different connotation than the definition we're familiar with. I hope that after all the pickups that LeBron and the Lakers have made earlier this season, they'll be able to win the chip this year.

No, this hope we have from God is a sure thing. It is a promise in which we can place our full faith in. Therefore, the author states that he who promised is faithful. As mentioned earlier, one of the motifs found in this book is the danger of drifting. The author continually warns his audience that they will face deadly eternal consequences if they do not hold fast to this hope and preserve the gospel. There's beauty found in these warnings. Remember, he's writing to a church. And yet, he doesn't just state that if you have believed, you are secure and have nothing to worry about. His view of eternal security is not so mechanical. God utilizes these warning passages to keep his sheep in his fold. So, you mustn't take the sting out of such warnings. Regardless of how sure you are of your salvation, believer, hold fast to this hope, or you will indeed be cast away.

Again, the following exhortation naturally flows from the preceding verse.

4. Let us...consider one another (community) vs. 24

²⁴ And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, ²⁵ 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.

With our remaining time, we'll discuss why here at the Chapel, we want you as a member to be present here for worship on the Lord's Day. I must first preface this section with the extreme cases that are exceptions to the rule. Some are deployed in the military, others on the mission field, others who may just be traveling, others who are sick, and the vulnerable. I don't want you to hear this message and believe I'm insensitive to these exceptions because that is untrue. I also know that not everyone who fails to prioritize in-person worship on the Lord's Day fits into one of these categories. For instance, ask yourself, "Why do I feel safer in a movie theatre than in a church service? Could I have not prioritized corporate worship as I should?" I liken it to the professing Christian who says, "I left the church because my experience with one wasn't so great." Well, do you withdraw your money from banks because your experience wasn't so great? No. You may switch banks, but in your appraisal, banks are

a necessity; therefore, not having your money in one is not an option. And yet, people are under this false allusion that being connected to a local church is an option. Therefore, they can do without it.

Similarly, many have decided that going to various places and interacting with multiple people is a must. Still, when it comes to church, the risk is not necessary because you can flip on the streaming service. Perish the thought. Or perhaps you should ask yourself, "Could it be that Covid has gotten me into the habit of not wanting to battle with the kids to get them in the car, therefore I roll over and stream from home? It is undoubtedly more convenient. But is it obedient? That is the question. And to get ahead of myself, I believe this text will shout out that if you can make it to the in-person gathering of the saints, you absolutely should.

By God's grace, a congregation is permitted to gather visibly in this world to share in God's word and sacrament. Not all Christians receive this blessing; the imprisoned, the sick, the scattered, lonely, and the proclaimers of the gospel in heathen lands stand alone. They know that the 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 and nothing but grace that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brothers and sisters. It is grace that we get to enjoy this privilege. -Dietrich Bonhoeffer

A few weeks back, I read an article about the Christians in Afghanistan who feared for their lives due to the rise of the Taliban. In the report, one of the Christians said, "We will not stop meeting, even if it costs us our lives." This brother understands the power of the church assembling. Do we?

The author says, "And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works." And then later, he says, "encouraging one another." Our assembling should never be "self-focused." One of the reasons you must attend in-person worship is to stir up and encourage others. This calls for a complete paradigm shift, as we have been trained to be consumerists when it comes to church. Have you ever heard of someone looking for a church lacking in an area? No, we want a church that can meet every single need that we come with. But this wasn't the original design when it came to in-person worship. We should always think of that person who may be struggling with their faith and needs your word to spur them on. You can't do this at home in your living room. We need you. This idea of physically assembling has always been at the heart of the identity of God's people, even in the Old Testament. The amount of Scripture that testifies to that fact is ubiquitous. We'll look at a few.

Then the king turned around and blessed all the assembly of Israel, while all the assembly of Israel stood. -1 Kings 8:14

Now therefore in the sight of all Israel, the assembly of the Lord, and in the hearing of our God, observe and seek out all the commandments of the Lord your God, that you may possess this good land and leave it for an inheritance to your children after you forever. -1 Chronicles 28:8

And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. -Nehemiah 8:1

The word for assembly in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the OT, is the word that the New Testament authors use for Church. So, by its very nature, the church necessitates assembling. That's why the NT also has an emphasis on gathering.

The author goes on, *not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some.*

Remember, earlier, I claimed that the last point naturally flowed into this one. The author tells his audience to hold fast to their hope, in other words, keep from drifting. Early signs of drifting away from the faith were, and still are, failing to come together. This church wasn't coming out of a pandemic, but some got out of the habit of meeting together. This is why I believe this passage is so incredibly applicable today. For this church, gathering together meant possible persecution and danger; for others, it was just apathy. But listen again to the words of New Testament Scholar Lane:

The writer regarded the desertion of the communal meetings as utterly serious. It threatened the corporate life of the congregation and almost certainly was a prelude to apostasy.

Let that sink in. The neglect may be a prelude to apostasy. Beloved, let us heed this warning and not forsake the gathering together as saints. Don't assume you're safe from apostasy due to past faithfulness if you neglect to gather with the saints now. If you are a member, especially a covenant member of this body, we ask you to be obedient and faithful to the Scripture and present whenever possible. This idea of waking up one Sunday morning and deciding flippantly that the beach or the bed seems to be a better destination than the Church should be foreign to our people.

I want to give you a picture of what happens when you worship with the saints on the Lord's Day. Turn with me to Hebrews 12:22-24.

²² But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, ²³ and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, ²⁴ and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. -Hebrews 12:22-24

We could camp out here for another 45 minutes, but we won't. Do you see what the author is getting at? The Old Testament temple was undoubtedly an impressive place to worship, but when we worship as the gathered saints, we are brought to heaven. We become an embassy or a colony for heaven. Not only that but we are joined by the whole host of heaven who worship with us. The angels themselves join us every Sunday to worship alongside us, our same Lord and Master, Jesus Christ. If only, like Elisha's servant, the Lord would open our eyes, just for a single second, we would see an overwhelming host of heavenly beings worshipping with us in our gathering. Also, mysteriously, our worship includes the assembly of the firstborn in heaven. I like what Megan Hill said,

Be encouraged when you come into a half-empty sanctuary on a rainy Sunday evening! The gathering may look small and insignificant; in reality, it's filled with those who sinlessly and ceaselessly worship God before his face.

And the most encouraging part of all is that God himself is with us as we worship him. And one may say, "Yes, he's indwelt in me through the Spirit, so he's with me at home as I stream as well." But not in the unique way he's with his collective people who are brought together to worship him.

There is indeed a responsibility to attend Church in person if you've covenanted with this body. But I pray that you see from this passage that this is also a privilege. In light of these glorious realities, don't forsake the church's assembly for worship. Week after week, let us come together to listen to God's word, read, and preached. Week after week, let us sing songs to each other and the Lord Jesus. Week after week, let us proclaim the Lord's death through communion. Week after week, let us encourage and spur one another on to good works until the day of his return.

Let's pray.

[1] Kent Hughes