

Gather My Saints

How To Church

Psalm 50:5

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Gather My saints together to Me, Those who have made a covenant with Me by sacrifice (Psalm 50:5).

Introduction

No small amount of confirmation bias steamed off the words of fifth century theologian, Augustine when he declared “I would not believe in the Gospel if the authority of the Catholic Church did not move me to do so.”¹ Rome took this quote as an affirmation of its own authority (Scripture, tradition, and the Magisterium-popes and bishops).

Protestants (and more biblically based Roman Catholics of the time) did not view Augustine’s words as placing the authority of the church above the Scriptures, but an acknowledgement of the role of the church as God’s primary instrument in delivering the message of Scripture to a world in need of the redemption.

But, as it appears unavoidable in doctrinal trends, the pendulum of today’s church has swung significantly passed center. One might say the pendulum has become Poe-like razor-sharp and is swinging over the heart of the church. By God’s grace, we trust that this error will not succeed in its effort to execute, as it were, the body of Christ. This is a great promise God has made, to preserve His church. Yet the blade appears penultimately successful in its ability to amputate many limbs from the body.

The modern evangelical views church as, perhaps, a good idea, but certainly not necessary vis-à-vis the well-being of the soul. This little problem goes all the way back to the printing press and the theological independence created by Bibles on one’s shelf. Who can argue against a Bible on the shelf? If read, Bibles are good to have around.

The expendability of the church accelerated with the writings of other books. Publishers, rather than the church, became the new de facto determiners of popular orthodoxy. Then came radio, where one can listen to sermons from the comfort of their parlor. Television and the televangelist (a

¹ Augustine, Fund. 1.6.

new word created) further exacerbated the problem. Station managers then became the arbiters of the rule of faith and practice.

Today's social media, which grants us access to the best sermons ever given (not really sure who runs that show), may tempt us to view the local, visible church as an anachronism. Has the local church become a relic, a sentimental outmoded institution?

Of course, if one is reading their Bibles, or the books about the Bible, or listening to good sermons on radio, television or the internet, it won't take long before they come across the word 'church'. It is either specifically stated as *church* or implied by some other phrase, e.g., the saints, my people, etc. And this happens hundreds of times.

And though the word 'church' can be referring to the invisible church (all true believers) or the universal church (all professing believers), by far, the word refers to local gatherings.

These gatherings consist of pastors (Ephesians 4:11), elders (1 Timothy 5:17), deacons (1 Timothy 3:8) and people who know and need each other (1 Corinthians 12:12-26). The great infraction by the Corinthian church during the Lord's Supper was their neglect of their fellow Christian during the meal (1 Corinthians 11). Consigning oneself to remote church makes this negligence all the more rampant.

Missing the clear call in Scripture to be part of the local body of Christ, a church, can be compared to a fish who is oblivious to the fact that it lives in water. We tend to read our Bibles as individuals who forget that (with a couple of exceptions-i.e., pastoral epistles written to pastors on how the church is to be governed) the Scriptures were written, not to the secular community, but to God's covenant people-to churches.

To the church of God which is at Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:2).

To the churches of Galatia (Galatians 1:2).

To the church of the Thessalonians (1 Thessalonians 1:1).

...to the beloved Apphia, Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house (Philemon 2).

All this to say that people who think all they need is their Bible, must contend with the overwhelming message they'll encounter as they read their

Bible. That they should be part of a church. If this clear admonition is ignored, they become a fish out of water. And you know how that goes.

The Prime Directive of Church

Now we ask, what is the prime directive of church? If we were to form a list of priorities, what's on top of the depth chart? Is it friendship, service, family, bonding, cultural amelioration? These types of things may be on the target, but what's the bullseye?

As you may know, the exodus serves throughout all of Scripture as the archetype example of deliverance. What was at the top of the list when we query why God freed the Israelites?

And they will listen to your voice, and you and the elders of Israel shall go to the king of Egypt and say to him, 'The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us; and now, please let us go a three days' journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to the Lord our God (Exodus 3:18).

It is a healthy disposition to view all of life as worship. In all we do we should seek to glorify God. But the chief bloodline of all that is good, nurturing and redemptive is the well-ordered, corporate worship of the true, living triune God.

God has determined one day in seven where we, in an undistracted manner, are to be reminded of who made us, who redeemed us, who preserves us, who holds our hands in the midst of trial, whose feathers cover us and under whose wings we take refuge (Psalm 91). It's like a Sunday evening family meal, the neglect of which we can lose track of our closest relatives.

Regulative Principle

So critical is this (if I can say it this way) event of church, that God goes above and beyond in His word to regulate what takes place. This is often called the *regulative principle*. Briefly explained, we are to do in worship only what God commands to be done in worship. We are not free to be innovative. This may seem obvious to any Christian. Should we not always do what God commands? But there is a little difference here.

God does not command me to go to the beach on a sunny day, but I am free to do so because He does not prohibit it. But in worship, it is not a matter of asking if God prohibits something. We must ask if God is requiring something. There is nothing in the Bible that prohibits bubble machines in worship. But does God command we have the bubbles?

When I was young our neighbor would squirt us with his hose when we rode our bikes by his house. It was an effort toward comradery and driven by his affection for the neighborhood kids. When I got married, I thought it would be a good idea for me to express my affection for my wife in similar manner. It did not have the desired effect. Somehow, I had arrived at the misguided conclusion that my wife's buttons were comparable to an eight-year-old boy on a bicycle. I had much to learn.

When Nadab and Abihu were devoured by fire for offering "**profane fire before the Lord**" it wasn't because they did something God had forbade. They did something "**which He had not commanded them**" (Leviticus 10:1). As God has commanded, we are to do everything "**according to the pattern which was shown you on the mountain**" (Exodus 25:40).

The Root of the Problem

We live in a world sullied with heartache and difficulty. Many of bemoan the current trajectory of our surroundings, as well as the pain and weakness in our own souls. We are seeking to find the culprit. Though there may be multiple layers of culpability, I believe it can be convincingly argued that if things are peeled back, we will find that a (if not the) root cause is found in the pulpits. And by pulpits, I mean the entire current trend of the worship service.

This fallen world might be compared to a starving and infected body in need of an IV. Flowing through the IV is the blood of Christ, the Gospel. It is the Gospel, the Gospel of Scripture, that heals the world. But the point of contact, the needle, is the worship of God's people, the worship service. At Pentecost it was through God's worshipping people that "**the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved**" (Acts 2:47). If this world remains in its sickened estate, it is largely due to a twisted or infected needle. Church has become a bit of a show.

In our efforts to obediently keep that needle and straight and clean as possible, what are the elements of worship? What are those actions which God has determined to a source of honor and glory to Himself and, at the

same time, nurturing to His people? Why did you come to church today? What did you think was going to happen? What is your role? Are you a spectator? A Critic? Or are you a participant? What should be happening at this highly critical event called church?

Elements of Worship

Call to Worship

With a recognition that the order and regularity of the events of worship may vary (along with some disagreements) from church to church, the service generally begins with a *call to worship*. At the risk of sounding uncharitable, the call to worship creates a significantly different disposition than, say, a worship leader asking everybody how they feel then saying, "Hey, let's worship together!"

The call to worship is not us asking God to worship with us, as much as it is God summoning us. "**Gather my saints**" (Psalm 50:5). The Father sent His Son to rescue us from sin and death at a great price. We are now called, as it were, to His palace to worship and honor Him for this great gift. We are called to remember what has been done for us, and praise Him for it. The will, as it were, is read yet again and we are reminded of our riches and price paid for them. No one who truly grasps this would refuse the call. If you had a friend give his life for you, would you refuse an invitation from his father to honor his son?

The call to worship is taken from God's word. It is His initiation. In our relationship with God, He acts first. He, through His word and by His Spirit comes before us. And as is so often the case when this type of thing happens in the Bible, our response is (or at least should be) one of recognition of our own sin. This leads to our response.

Confession of Sin

When Isaiah was caught up into the throne room, before singing with all the angels, he first confessed:

Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I *am* a man of unclean lips, And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, The Lord of hosts (Isaiah 6:5).

The routine and reasonable response to being in the presence of God is an utter and complete dismantling of trust in self. John fell at the feet of the glorified Christ **“as though dead” (Revelation 1:16)**. When Jesus calmed the storm, there was a serious reassignment of fear among the apostles. They went from being afraid of the storm to being **“filled with great fear”** at the prospect of who sat in their boat (Mark 4:40, 41).

But, as the great hymn declares, “twas grace that taught my heart to fear and grace those fears relieved.” And the liturgical dialogue continues. God does not leave those who trust in Him some hopeless condition of fear. A pardon is declared.

Pardon of Sin

It is fair to say that Isaiah was paralyzed with fear and had no path forward until God commissioned His angel to bring a coal (which is a type of the Gospel) and touch the lips of Isaiah, then declaring...

**Behold, this has touched your lips; Your iniquity is taken away,
And your sin purged (Isaiah 6:7).**

We generally approach God with a petition that He may deliver us from the fear of the world or some temporal difficulty. And there may be a place for that. The apostles were delivered from the fear of the storm. But the deepest fear that we are delivered from is the fear of judgment.

And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell (Matthew 10:28).

What the saints need to be reminded of is that they’re pardoned. Their sins are washed away.

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9).

If this is true of you. Then every other problem you have, every fear lurking, need never be a source of anxiety. As Paul wrote,

He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things (Romans 8:32)?

Worship now continues with renewed appreciation of the realization that our battle with sin (both outwardly and inwardly) is a battle that ultimately has already been won by the blood of Christ. God sees us as cleansed.

Hymn

Another prominent element of worship is song. If only we truly, deeply grasped what has happened in the first eight minutes of church! How would that affect our singing. And even though our singing is directed toward the One who is worthy of all praise, in a secondary sense, it is directed to each other as well. Paul writes of the church...

...speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord (Ephesians 5:19).

We are told, after Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, that they "**sung a hymn**" (Matthew 26:30). I wonder what that sounded like. Keep in mind, that though we have leaders in music, we are all the choir. The music should never drown out the voices and the leaders are there that we might know when the songs/stanzas begin and on what note. But we are the choir. In what manner will you sing to the Father who gave His Son for you?

A Voice of One Accord

The congregation now has the opportunity to lift their voices to God in one accord (Acts 4:24; Exodus 24:3, 7). This may include the Lord's Prayer, the Apostle's Creed, the Ten Commandments, or some other reading of Scripture.

In a valuable, yet secondary, sense these readings are pedagogical. We learn things. But in a primary sense, we are proclaiming to God and before men what we, as the body of Christ, believe.

Tithes and Offerings

Every Sunday a part of the liturgy is tithes and offerings (Numbers 18:26-28; Deuteronomy 12:6; 1 Corinthians 16:1, 2; 2 Corinthians 9:12). It is listed among the deeds of worship:

There you shall take your burnt offerings, your sacrifices, your tithes, the heave offerings of your hand, your vowed offerings, your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks (Deuteronomy 12:6).

Similar to any other portion of worship, we should seek to develop a proper engagement in our tithes and offerings. This has been covered in greater detail in an earlier sermon, so I won't go deeply here. Let us be reminded, nonetheless, that we are to approach this portion of the church service, not merely as business, but as worship.

Pastoral Prayer

We then have corporate prayer. One of the few descriptions given by Jesus regarding the temple was that it was a **"house of prayer"** (Matthew 21:13). Paul exhorts his young mentor Timothy that prayers should be made for all people (1 Timothy 2:1).

That the church should pray is not a matter of controversy. It is not unclear and almost nobody I've ever seen, either currently or in history, opposes prayer. But prayer is difficult. And it is presented in the Bible as such. We are told that Epaphras is **"always struggling on your behalf in his prayers"** (Colossians 4:12). Struggling *agonizomai* is where we get the word agonize. Paul writes that his readers might **"strive together with [him] in [their] prayers"** (Romans 15:30). Jacob wrestled with God (Genesis 32:22-32). Wrestling is tiring. Our corporate time of prayer is work.

Sermon

The central focus of the church, it's great commission, is to deliver the Good News.

How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, Who bring glad tidings of good things (Romans 10:15)!

There is the glorious command to “**preach to the people**” of a day of judgment and the forgiveness that comes through Jesus Christ (Acts 10:42, 43). It is the responsibility of the pastor help...

...the people to understand the Law, and they [give] the sense, so that the people understood the reading (Nehemiah 8:7, 8).

In order to achieve this, a pastor needs to know his congregation. He needs to know their maturity level, their intellectual capacity and their struggles. The books in the Bible were generally written to specific churches regarding specific issues. Sermons should be similar. This is something that cannot be achieved without some level of intimacy. Those listening to me on the radio may receive some benefit. But I don't know them.

And it is the responsibility of those in attendance to actively listen, to receive and to respond. We are to be as the “**noble-minded**” Bereans who “**searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so**” (Acts 17:11). We are called to

Test all things; hold fast what is good (1 Thessalonians 5:21).

Sermons can contain that which is simple. What the Scriptures call milk. They can also be deep and difficult. What the Scriptures call solid food (1 Corinthians 3:2). How to listen to a sermon can be its own message. For now, I will just say that you may not understand everything, but if attentive, you will understand some. And if you're consistent in your attendance, you will understand more and more.

The message should focus on Christ and should contain a call to action. The action may be worship or some behavioral change or a call to faith. Either way, we should listen in such a way that we can respond the way Peter's sermon was responded to:

Now when they heard *this*, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Men *and* brethren, what shall we do” (Acts 2:37).

Sacraments

Sadly, if most of today's evangelicals were asked to make a top-ten list of behaviors necessary for their own spiritual edification, baptism and the Lord's Supper may not make the list. This is a great departure the modern Christian has, not only with the history of the church, but with Scripture as well.

It would be overly ambitious to get into the details of the meaning and value of the sacraments, of which there are two: Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Enough to say for now that they are a means of grace. And there is something deep, dangerous and a bit mysterious about how God works in these things. And it is of great detriment to the church and the Christians who attend, to neglect these things.

It should also be noted that publishers, station managers and your internet provider cannot offer you baptism or the Lord's Supper. It is a corporate communion with God and with one another.

Benediction

The church service concludes with a benediction. It literally means good speak or to speak well. It is generally understood as a blessing. After being married I developed a new appreciation for the benediction. When my wife and I had a disagreement, it would bother me until things were resolved. Finally, there would come a time when words were spoken that revealed that things were good.

How much deeper with God. For God to say "It is well with us" or "Go in peace." Of course, all of this assumes that we are truly children of God. The best and most accurate of church services become testimonies to our own judgment if they are not participated in by faith. If you have true, sincere faith, then the benediction is yours.