

Why do we Meet?

If you went to church in England in the year 1200, what would you have experienced?

- You'd have seen an altar in the central place in the front of the church – probably with a crucifix in its centre or on the wall above it.
- You'd have observed a priest in ceremonial robes perform certain ceremonial actions at that altar – except you probably couldn't have seen many of those actions because his back was toward you.
- You'd have heard the priest speak various words – at least, you assumed they were words because he claimed to speak in Latin and you'd never been taught Latin.

The focus of the Christian gathering was on the Eucharist – it was an important ceremony to be performed by the priest out the front.

If you went to church in England in the year 1600, what you'd have experienced would have been very different from the year 1200.

- You'd have seen a change in the arrangements of the furniture – the pulpit was introduced and placed in a prominent position.
- You'd have observed a priest in reasonably plain clothes whose actions you could watch.
- You'd have heard that priest speak in English – you'd have understood the things he prayed and the instructions he gave.
- You'd have heard the Bible read – several times and also in English.

The focus of the Christian gathering was more on the word – it was important people other than the priest were

present and they understood what was going on and they understood what God said to them in the Bible.

If you went to church in England in the year 2000, what would you have experienced? That's more difficult – because by the year 2000 there was a wide variety of different types of churches and what each of those different types did when they met together could be like chalk and cheese.

- Some had a strong focus on the ceremonial.
- Some had a strong focus on the Word of God.
- Some had a strong focus on the Lord's Supper.
- Some had a strong focus on praise.
- Some had a strong focus on fellowship.
- Some had a strong focus on evangelism.

It gets a bit confusing, doesn't it? How is it that all these Christians have all these different ideas about what they're supposed to do when they get together? Who's right? Who's wrong? Could they all be right? Is it an area of Christian freedom? That is, is it an area in which God gives each group the freedom to decide what they want to do when they gather together as His people?

The important thing, first of all, is to see what the Bible has to say about it. After all, this is where God tells us what He thinks is important for our Christian lives. Does the Bible give us any clues as to what we should do when we gather as God's church?

Turn to Acts 2:42. This tells us what the earliest church did when they gathered together. The previous verse speaks about 3000 people becoming Christians on the Day of Pentecost. Then Luke tells us:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and

to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

Four things:

- teaching;
- fellowship;
- breaking of bread; and
- prayer.

Some of those things are explained further in the verses that follow. For example,

- in verses 44 and 45, it tells us that their fellowship included having things in common and selling possessions so they could give to their brothers and sisters in need. That wasn't the sum total of their fellowship – but it was a definite part of it.
- in verse 46, it tells us they broke bread in their homes and ate together. There's some argument as to whether this is a reference to simply having meals together or a technical term to refer to the communion service – or whether it actually means both since the communion service in those days seems to have been part of a meal.

Now we should note that, in telling us this, Luke's just informing us what the early church did. He doesn't say: This is what the church should do for all time. There's no word of command here: Thou shalt meet for teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayer. He simply says: This is what the earliest church did. This is what they thought important for their meetings. They did, of course, have the apostles among them – and so we probably should give much more weight to what they thought important than what some obscure 10th-century

group in western France thought important – yet, there's no direct command in what Luke says.

It's also interesting to note they met daily. Perhaps that reflects a different age and a different culture – or perhaps it reflects a greater level of commitment to their Christian faith.

Verse 47 refers to them also *praising God*. This could be an example of the way they prayed. It could be a reference to them joining together in song. It could refer to their testimony to those outside the church. It could be all three – it could be something else altogether. The context doesn't really specify the exact method by which they praised God.

The next reference we'll look at is 1 Corinthians 14:26

What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church.

It's important to note that this verse comes in the context of some corrections Paul gives to the way the Corinthians conducted their meetings. The passage we looked at last week in 1 Corinthians 12 – about the church as the body of Christ – is part of that discussion. They used their different gifts and abilities in the wrong way. They used them for their own ends, rather than the common good. In the chapter before that – 1 Corinthians 11 – Paul tells them off because they lacked concern and consideration for one another when they meet for the Lord's Supper. Their meetings were characterised by pride and selfishness.

This list of things in chapter 14 isn't a complete list. This isn't all they did when they gathered together. Paul has also spoken about prayer and prophecy and the Lord's Supper as part of their meetings. Earlier in chapter 14 he hints that singing and giving thanks were also involved. Even if we add those five things to this list, I don't think we'd have a complete list. What this list does do is indicate there were a variety of things that were part of their meetings and a variety of people were involved. It doesn't say these things have to be part of their meetings.

However, it does give a command. Paul says everything that goes on in their meetings should be for *the strengthening of the church*. In other words, everything should be done for the common good. The church doesn't come together simply for a concert where everyone showcases their various gifts and abilities and gets the applause and congratulations of the others present. That's not the point of the gathering. The point is that the church be strengthened for its task as the church. While this verse may not give us a definitive list of what should happen in church meetings, it does give us very clear instructions as to their purpose. Our aim in gathering is to help one another in our Christian lives – to build each other up; to encourage Christian growth.

Turn now to Hebrews 10:24

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Here, there's no indication of what happened when the Christians met together. It doesn't say whether they sang

or prayed or listened to a sermon or whatever. It simply gives two instructions.

- First, don't give up meeting. In other words, the Bible tells us it's important we do meet. It seems some may have thought that, since they now have access into the heavenly Holy of Holies, they no longer had to bother about holy places on earth. At one level, they're right – the existence or otherwise of holy places on earth is now irrelevant. Yet, that didn't mean they could give up meeting together as a church – for that wasn't the purpose of the church gathering.
- For secondly, says the writer, when you meet as the church – and maybe also at other times when you meet one another in the normal run of life – use the time to encourage one another as Christians. Spur one another on in your Christian lives – especially in the areas of love and doing good. Remind each other of the end – of the time when Jesus returns and when the judgment will occur and when sin and evil will be done away with. Keep your eyes focused on the goal – and encourage each other to focus on the goal.

Have a look at Ephesians 4:11-13.

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

That passage doesn't specifically mention the church meeting – rather, it refers to the task given to apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastor/teachers. Their task is:

- to prepare God's people for works of service;
- to build up the body of Christ;
- to encourage unity;
- to help Christians become mature.

Certainly, those things can be done outside the whole church meeting – they can be done in smaller groups or in one-on-one discipleship. In other words, it could be possible that the whole church meeting was something separate from what Paul writes here. Yet, I find it hard to imagine these things Paul thought of crucial importance to the body of Christ weren't also a central focus of their whole church meeting – especially when that's the focus of the other three passages we've looked at.

There's another verse that people often quote in relation to church meetings – Ephesians 5:19

Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

That verse also doesn't specifically refer to the church meeting. Indeed, the surrounding verses seem to refer more to the individual Christian life – unless they were getting drunk in their church meetings and living their family life at church. Yet, because it mentions psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, and because that's what we do at church, people often think this is talking about the church meetings. The context suggests that perhaps that isn't the main focus. Interestingly enough, in this verse:

- the psalms, hymns and spiritual songs are spoken to

one another; and

- the singing to God is done in the heart.

However, the somewhat parallel verse in Colossians 3:16 seems to allow the singing to God to be done out loud.

1 and 2 Timothy and Titus are letters Paul wrote to two of his co-workers left in charge of churches in Ephesus and Crete. Many of the instructions in those letters relate to what Paul expects these two men to do in relation to those churches. He doesn't include a list of all the things to be done in the church gathering, but there are some emphases that seem to come through:

- prayer;
- the public reading of Scripture;
- preaching and teaching;
- encouraging people to live godly lives; and
- warning about false teaching.

Now, one of the problems with doing a topical sermon is the danger of missing out an important passage. I think what we've covered deals with the main thrust of what the New Testament says about our church gatherings. Unfortunately – no, that's the wrong word, because the Bible is God's word and there's no unfortunate about it – our Bibles don't include a bit which says this is exactly what you have to do when you gather as the church. We piece together a more general picture of the purpose of our gathering from different bits and pieces scattered throughout the New Testament. I haven't mentioned every verse that could be mentioned, but I don't think I've left out any that give a different perspective. However, I haven't read right through the New Testament in this last week to check whether there were any other important bits I've omitted. So, it's possible you could come up

with a passage that adds something new or different that I've overlooked.

It seems to me that the main thrust of what the New Testament says is that our church meetings are for the purpose of encouraging and building up Christians. That can be done through a variety of activities – songs, reading the Bible, prayer, teaching, warnings, examples and others not even mentioned in the New Testament. It's a matter of people using the gifts God's given them in an orderly manner so Christians learn what it means to be Christians and are encouraged to put what they learn into practice.

It's interesting to notice what's missing from the New Testament in relation to the church gathering. The term *worship* isn't used. It's not that the idea of *worship* is absent from the New Testament – it's just that it's not used to describe the church gathering.

- It's used in the gospels to talk about people bowing or falling at the feet of Jesus.
- It's used to describe people bowing or falling at the feet of other people whom they acknowledge as being of higher rank than themselves.
- It's used to describe the worship of pagan idols.
- It's used to describe the Jewish religion based at the temple in Jerusalem.
- It's used to describe the lives of Christians as they submit to Jesus, do good to one another and preach the gospel in the world.

Those uses reflect the basic meaning of the main Greek word. It's a word that speaks of bowing to the ground as a mark of respect to a great person (which is interesting in relation to the modern tendency in some circles to stand

for "worship"). It conveys the idea of *surrender* or *submission*. A couple of the other Greek words that are sometimes translated *worship* convey the idea of service – not the idea of a church service, but the idea of serving God in the way He desires. We're going to look at those words and how the New Testament uses them over the next two Sundays.

For many Christians, I think there's been a shift away from the New Testament in relation to what worship is about and in relation to what church is about.

- In relation to *worship*, they've focused on the English word and the idea of giving God His worth. Now, that could still be understood in terms similar to the New Testament. How do I truly give God His worth? As a finite human being, God's worth is far beyond what I can possibly hope to give. Thus, to give God His worth would demand my whole life to be lived in surrender and submission to Him – and then I still wouldn't have given Him His worth. That's consistent with the New Testament. But for some, the word is watered down. That "whole of life" submission idea is gone. *Worship* is simply associated with ritual. It's what I do in church. It's when I give God His bit of the week to keep Him happy. For some, it's only part of the ritual – the special time of singing known as the *worship time* – as if what I sing to God is worship and listening to what God says to me in His word is not worship.
- In relation to *church*, they've focused on something other than what the New Testament seems to focus on. This has been a problem throughout the history of the church. There were times in the past where

church meetings degenerated into ritual performances not understood by most of the people present. How could they be built up in their Christian lives by that which they didn't understand? It was an approach to church that had more in common with magical practices than with the gospel. Yet, that's not the only way in which people's focus has varied from the New Testament.

We need to get this into proper focus. It's as if we're saying to God:

Well, no God, I don't want to use church to involve myself in serving and encouraging my Christian brothers and sisters like You want me to. I want to use church for this other purpose. Surely You can understand if I ignore Your instructions for such a worthy purpose. Surely You can understand if I don't submit to You when the thing I'm doing is so much better than what You want me to do.

True worship of God means submitting to Him in all of life – and that includes submitting to His purposes for our gatherings.

Please note what I haven't said. I haven't said we should get rid of music from our church gatherings. That does not follow.

- Some of those New Testament verses we looked at earlier talk about speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs – and I don't really think it makes a great deal of difference whether we speak them to one another or sing them to one another. Many of our songs are addressed to one another. This is a form of encouraging one another – as we sing to one another the truths of our Christ-

ian faith and remind one another what our Christian lives are supposed to be. Of course, that assumes we actually think about the words that we sing.

- I think there's also value in singing songs that remind us who God is and how great He is and what He's done for us – songs of praise. Certainly, the New Testament encourages us to praise God as individuals. Even if it didn't, that should be our natural response when we understand who God is. And I think there's value in praising God together in our meetings. Reminding ourselves of God's greatness and sovereignty is a great way of encouraging each other in our Christian lives. It builds us up in our Christian faith. It reminds us of Who it is we acknowledge as Boss. It helps us to see life in the context of His sovereignty. Thus, I think it fits within the New Testament focus of why we meet.

However, I don't think it's helpful to single out the praise of God as "the worship time". Certainly, praising God is part of our worship of Him – but so is praying and listening to the sermon and driving to church and going to school or work and buying the groceries. The New Testament concept of worship is my submission to God in all of my life. Sticking the adjective *corporate* in front of worship doesn't change it either – because praising God isn't the only way we're supposed to submit to Him as a group of people.

Why do we meet? Perhaps we could go back to the picture of the church as the body of Christ we looked at last week – although the New Testament doesn't use that picture in the way I'm about to. Our physical bodies need recharging – they need food and drink and they need rest.

Perhaps we could think of the church meeting in those terms. It's an opportunity for the body to recharge itself – to remind itself of whose body it is and to remind itself of what His purpose for the body is within the world. We are easily distracted.

- We forget God's sovereign and is able to use all circumstances within our lives for His good purposes.
- We forget we are His and start to pursue the things those who don't acknowledge God pursue – things like worldly wealth and worldly desires and worldly ambitions.
- We forget we're here to serve one another and reach others for Jesus.
- We forget we're part of a larger group of people involved together in the same thing.

We gather to stir one another up to good works and to encourage one another to get on with being Christians in the world.

The church meeting isn't supposed to be about us all coming together to have our private devotions in a public setting. It's about trying to help one another grow as Christians. Part of that growth comes from hearing God's word and applying it to our lives. Part of that growth comes from sharing with one another on more than just a superficial level. We find that hard – so let's ask God to help us.

Perhaps, after we've sung our final song, we could think through together how we may best use our time here to do that.