

“Gathering regularly to worship the risen Lord Jesus is essential to the health of the Christian and the health of the church. Without it, we will wither and eventually die spiritually. This book highlights both why we gather and what we do when we gather. Read it with much encouragement and profit.”

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“As a pastor, Tony Merida is giving his life to serving the local church. As a scholar, he uses his considerable gifts to bolster the church and those who serve it, through his teaching and writing ministry. Merida brings the full weight of his experience and gifting together in *Gather*. All who love the church will be encouraged by reading *Gather*, and every local church will be strengthened by applying its message.”

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“Tony Merida encourages us to move from spectating in directionless comfort to participating with joyful purpose. This book challenges us to reassess our individual motivations for gathering and to realign our hearts with the privilege we have in Christ—to praise and worship our Father God together. The biblical truths outlined in this book will renew our resolve to devote ourselves to our church gatherings (Acts 2:42).”

LUCY LYELL, Chair, London Ministry Wives

“This timely book crackles with energy from cover to cover. The theological vision of church life that it offers is grand and exhilarating, yet it is grounded and practical, down to the value of a good night’s sleep on Saturday night! I hope that everyone in the church I pastor will read it, and I am excited to put its lessons into practice in my own life. You could easily read this book in a single sitting—which is great, because it is worth reading over and over.”

NICK TUCKER, Vicar, Bishop Hannington Memorial Church,
Hove, Sussex, UK; Author, *12 Things God Can't Do*

“With profound clarity, Tony Merida weaves together theological truth and practical wisdom to provide readers with a renewed vision of the beauty and necessity of the local gathering. In a cultural moment when more and more Christians believe they can hold on to Jesus while leaving behind his church, this is the book everyone needs to read!”

ELIZABETH WOODSON, Author, *Embrace Your Life*

“This is a timely and necessary call to all who profess to love Jesus. Tony writes in a way that not only tells me why I need to gather but makes me want to.”

ALISTAIR BEGG, Senior Pastor, Parkside Church, Cleveland, Ohio; Bible Teacher, Truth For Life; Author, *Pray Big*

“This book made me look forward to Sunday! Here, you’ll find a compelling and highly practical exploration of why we gather each week as God’s people.”

JONTY ALLCOCK, Pastor, The Globe Church, London;
Author, *Impossible Commands*



gather

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Gather

Loving Your Church as You Celebrate Christ Together

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Published by:

The Good Book Company

thegoodbook.com | thegoodbook.co.uk

thegoodbook.com.au | thegoodbook.co.nz | thegoodbook.co.in

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Cover design by Faceout Studio | Art direction and design by André Parker

ISBN: 9781784988272 | Printed in the UK

To Kimberly, my dear companion

*“Oh, magnify the LORD with me,
and let us exalt his name together!”*

(Psalm 34:3)

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FOREWORD

BY DAVID PLATT

Not long ago, I received a letter from a teenager in our church, who shared the following with me:

Ever since I was little my parents have been separated. My dad is a drug addict and abusive. My first memory with him is a time when I was little and his PO came to my door to do a drug test on him. To make sure he passed the test, he made me urinate in the cup for him. My mom moved around a lot and married into a gang. My life has many different stories that you probably wouldn't believe. My mom died a year and a half ago, and my dad doesn't like me anymore. I lived with my grandma but last year I moved in with my aunt and uncle and that's how I started going to your church. Because of everything going on in my life, I had lost faith in God, and I didn't like going to church. But God's Word being preached here really got through to me and changed my life forever.

This young woman went on to share how she had placed her trust and hope in Jesus as the only one who could

save, heal, satisfy, and redeem her, and she was ready to confess her faith in him through baptism.

As I read this letter, I was heartbroken by all the hurt this teenage girl has experienced. At the same time, I was exhilarated by all that happened in her life once she started gathering with our church. Having been let down in so many ways in the world, she had come into our church's gatherings, and through our singing, praying, and preaching, she had discovered the God who will never let her down and a people who assemble to build one another up. By simply being a part of gathered worship, God really "got through" to her, and her life was changed.

Indeed, there is nothing in the world like the gathering of the church. No other meeting or event is like the one that happens week by week when God's people come together in a local church. That is because this gathering, unlike every other gathering in the world, is supernaturally designed by God to edify followers of Jesus and draw people to Jesus while exalting the name of Jesus. In other words, no other gathering is guaranteed by God to lead to our good, to others' good, and to God's glory.

That's why I am so grateful for the book that you hold in your hands, written by a brother and friend whom I love and respect, and I wholeheartedly commend it to you. Whether you are new to faith in Jesus or you've been following Jesus for decades, I am confident that this short book will serve you well. Built upon biblical

foundations and filled with practical application, these chapters will help you and others around you experience God's great design for the gathering of his people, particularly in a day when we are tempted in so many ways to diminish or even disregard it altogether.

May the fruit of this book be more and more people coming together before God with all our hurts, pains, struggles, doubts, questions, joys, and sorrows; and may he really "get through" to us in ways that change all our lives and lead to the spread of his glory among all the nations.

David Platt
Pastor-Teacher, McLean Bible Church
August 2022

INTRODUCTION

A RENEWED VISION OF THE GATHERING

In this book, I want to magnify the priority and privilege of *corporate worship*—that is, believers gathering to worship together in the local church¹—and to highlight ways in which, as Christians, we can participate in it for our good, for the good of unbelievers, and for the glory of Christ.² My hope is that you'll be excited about gathering Sunday by Sunday, and that you'll see how you can contribute to that gathering as well as getting the most from that gathering. To put it another way, this book is not just aiming to motivate you to attend your church's services, but to help you make the most of them when you're there, and to help others make the most of them, too.

1 The phrase "corporate worship" may sound like business terminology, but it is taken from the Latin term *corpus* meaning *body*. Thus, it refers to when the body of Christ meets for worship. It may also be called "gathered," "assembled," "public," or "congregational" worship. I will use these terms interchangeably.

2 These ways of participation are selective. I am not attempting to provide a liturgy for churches to follow, but rather attempting to highlight some of the primary features in corporate worship across denominations and throughout time.

This subject is *timeless*, being a central aspect of discipleship. Many of us, I think, have never really stopped to consider the rich significance of corporate worship and the purposes of it, so reflecting on this subject carefully will lead to both joy and growth. But this subject is also *timely*, given the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The weekly gathering has been a widely discussed issue, as attendance in gatherings has dropped in many places in the wake of the pandemic. Lots of questions and concerns have been raised about this trend.

To be clear right at the start of this book, attending a church service does not make anyone a Christian. To paraphrase my friend Joby Martin, “Sticking your head in a church building doesn’t make you a Christian any more than sticking your head in an oven makes you a biscuit!” Only Jesus saves. He changes us from the inside out. But with that said, the regular gathering of Christians in a local church is one of the primary ways in which we live out our changed lives as faithful disciples of Jesus. A Christian is marked not only by a love for Christ but also by a love for his people (1 John 3:14). The New Testament knows nothing of “lone-ranger Christianity.” Our faith is personal, but it is not individualistic. God wants us to live our faith out in community in church, and regularly gathering for worship and instruction is at the heart of this idea.

THERE'S NOTHING GREATER THAT WE COULD DO TOGETHER

For several years, our church (Imago Dei Church in Raleigh, North Carolina) helped support a church plant in Frankfurt, Germany, which was led by a pastor named Stephan Pues. On one visit to our church, Stephan was able to join us for corporate worship (we met in a storefront at that time), but because his flight left on Monday morning, I was unable to show him round our city. I said sadly to Stephan, "Man, I'm sorry. I wish we had some more time together. I would love to show you some of my favorite restaurants and some of my favorite sites." Stephan, who is not the dramatic type, responded:

There's nothing greater that we could have done together. There's nothing greater that you could have shown me. I just got to worship with the saints at Imago Dei Church. We got to enjoy the end for which we are created together.

He was right, and he'd remembered what I'd forgotten: *there is nothing greater than gathering to worship with the church family.* Nothing.

The problem is, many of us don't actually live like that. For some, gathering is fine if you have nothing else to do on a Sunday. For others, travel, sports, and other activities are given priority over it. In recent years, many have preferred watching the livestream in their pajamas rather than going through the hassle of showing up physically. Others reason that since you can worship

God in the beauty of nature, then going to the lake or the mountains is of equal value to gathering with the saints.

Maybe some of that resonates with you. Maybe for you, even if you don't see it as an optional extra, church on a Sunday is a duty to fulfill, not a delight to anticipate. What will make all of us like Stephan? Only a renewed vision of corporate worship. So let me take you straight to a remarkable passage in Hebrews 12, where the writer says:

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, 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, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.

(Hebrews 12:22-24, 28-29)

Don't miss what he's saying: when we gather for corporate worship, not only do we join with millions of brothers and sisters around the world, but we also join a heavenly worship service that is already happening, and that one day we ourselves will stand in! As Edmund Clowney says, "In corporate worship we rise by faith to

enter the heavenly assembly of the saints and angels”³ to worship with gratitude the God who is gracious to sinners and with great gravity before the God who is a consuming fire. In other words, there is more going on than meets the eye in our gatherings.

All of us gather in community. It’s part of being human and always has been. We gather for a whole host of reasons: football games, political protests, pop concerts, and more. People will show up early, stay late, express themselves passionately, spend loads of money, and drive great distances to attend these events. But they all pale in comparison with the glorious gathering of God’s people. These events are enjoyable, but they cannot be anything other than temporary and fleeting, and they cannot ultimately fulfill us. None of them carry the significance of the people of God assembled for worship.

LET US EXALT HIS NAME TOGETHER

In light of this, it should be no surprise that the New Testament continually emphasizes the importance and goodness of God’s people gathering. The earliest snapshot of the church conveys this moving image of the church gathered. Following Peter’s preaching of the gospel on the day of Pentecost, about 3,000 people were converted and baptized: “And they devoted themselves to

³ Edmund P. Clowney, “Corporate Worship: A Means of Grace,” *Give Praise to God*, edited by Philip Graham Ryken, Derek W.H. Thomas, and J. Ligon Duncan III (P&R, 2003), p 96.

the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42). Throughout Acts, believers gathered together for worship and instruction. In his epistles, Paul refers to the gathering on numerous occasions because it is intrinsic to the Christian life: "When [not if] you come together as a church..." he writes to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 11:18). The writer of Hebrews warns Christians of the danger of "neglecting to meet together" (Hebrews 10:25).

In this, the New Testament is simply carrying on what we see among the people of God in the Old Testament. The phrase "meet[ing] together" in Hebrews 10:25 is the word *episynagōgē*. You can hear the old word "synagogue" in it (where a Jewish assembly met for worship and teaching). And the word for "church" is taken from the Old Testament term for "assembly" (*ekklēsia* in Greek). A church is an *assembling*. It is, of course, more than that, but it's never less. Throughout redemptive history God's people have assembled. There are numerous Old Testament examples of the saints gathered (see Deuteronomy 9:10; Judges 20:2; 1 Kings 8:14; 1 Chronicles 28:8; Nehemiah 8:1-2). The Psalms highlight this privilege and priority:

*Oh, magnify the LORD with me,
and let us exalt his name together! (Psalm 34:3)*

*Oh come, let us worship and bow down;
let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!
For he is our God,*

*and we are the people of his pasture,
and the sheep of his hand. (Psalm 95:6-7)*

The Psalms of Ascent portray God's people singing on their way to Jerusalem to worship God together during festival seasons (Psalms 120 – 134).

This is what God's people have always done: they exalt their Redeemer *together*. I know church gatherings may not look as impressive as pop concerts or sports events or political rallies. Believers gathered in a small building, in a storefront, in a house, or even in a beautiful church building can look less than spectacular. But this is why we must assess things in a biblical way rather than a worldly way. Though the psalmist had the Old Testament temple rather than the new-covenant church in mind, his words have application for the church's gathering:

*For a day in your courts is better
than a thousand elsewhere.*

*I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God
than dwell in the tents of wickedness. (Psalm 84:10)*

There is nothing greater. And I have to ask myself: do I believe this? How can my heart catch up with my theology? I know I need to rehearse something like this on some Sunday mornings: "Better is one day in your courts, oh Lord, than sitting on the front row on the third base side at Nationals Park watching the Nationals play a baseball game." You can insert your own favorite place or activity.

JESUS IS IN OUR MIDST

There are two more truths that we need to work into our hearts if we are to believe that there is nothing greater than gathering as church. The first is that when we assemble as his people, Jesus is present with us by his Spirit in a particularly powerful way. Of course you can worship God anywhere, but there is something special about the corporate assembly. It is “the household of God,” built on “Christ Jesus himself [as] the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord ... into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit” (Ephesians 2:19-22).

One writer puts it this way:

*As the church is being renewed today, Jesus’ grace and glory are especially being experienced in worship. Like Israel of old, as we gather in His name and direct our sustained praises to Him (not just about Him), His Spirit descends and His presence is manifest in our midst. Jesus is here.*⁴

You simply cannot experience this anywhere else. Richard Foster puts it succinctly: “When we are truly gathered into worship, things occur that could never occur alone.”⁵

4 Don Williams, “Psalms 73-150” in *The Preacher’s Commentary* (Thomas Nelson, Kindle Edition, 1989), Kindle locations 2290-2292.

5 Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (Harper Collins, 1998), p 164.

Then second, the local assembly is a preview of the glory to come. In fact, the temple served as a “copy” of heaven itself (Hebrews 8:1-5), where all the redeemed will be gathered and finally at home (Revelation 21 – 22). It contained echoes of the Garden of Eden and pointed ahead to paradise being restored. All of history is moving to the climactic moment of all believers being gathered around the throne, worshipping together with worshipers from every tribe, people, language, and nation (5:9). No other gathering under heaven compares to this reality. When we gather together, we are being given—and we are experiencing—a glimpse of that future gathering in the new heavens and the new earth.

All of this is a result of the gracious initiative of God, who has drawn us to Christ by the power of the Spirit and has transformed us. A result of true conversion is a *change in affections*. Old loves have been replaced by a superior, all-satisfying love for Jesus. And the desire to express adoration to him, alongside other brothers and sisters purchased by his blood, is the result of the regenerating and renewing work of the Holy Spirit. So, as you begin to read this book, do be praying. Ask God to work in you by his Spirit so that in joyful worship of his Son, you are able to say of your church gathering, unspectacular though it may look in the eyes of the world, “There is nothing greater”. That is the path to seeing it as a privilege and making it a priority, not as duty but as delight.

