



The Dangerous Habit of Not Meeting Together

If you have a Bible—and I hope you do—let me invite you to open with me to Hebrews 10. Today I want to particularly welcome those who are watching or listening online. You may be the only ones watching or listening to me right now in this particular sermon. At this moment, on this Sunday, various MBC pastors at different locations are sharing God’s Word at those locations. They’re all talking about re-opening as a church, right now, this week, in the days and the months to come. Many of those re-opening plans are pretty specific to those locations.

Meanwhile, I am talking to those of you who are at home or somewhere else today. My assumption is that there may be many possible reasons why you’re watching or listening online. You may be a member of MBC and you’re traveling, so you just wanted to make sure not to miss a Sunday with your church family, even while you’re away. If that’s you, I just want to say I am so glad you prioritize not missing a Sunday with your church family. That says a lot about your heart, and I praise God for you joining in this way.

Or maybe you’re deployed overseas and there’s not a church you can attend where you are, so you faithfully gather with your church family as best you can every week until you’re able to make it back home. Again, I think that says a lot about your priorities. I want you to know that you are missed and I pray for God’s blessing on you and your family in this time when you’re away. We look forward to you being back.

Or maybe you’re watching online because it’s either physically impossible or physically unwise for you to be here physically otherwise you would be here in person if you could. So, I’m glad that you’re able to join this way, and I pray for God’s grace, strength, healing and mercy to be yours in every way during these days.

There may be many reasons why you’re not gathered physically with the church right now. But there’s one more group I want to specifically mention, those of you who have gotten into a habit over the last year of not gathering with the church. It was just over a year ago when, for the first time in many of our lives, we could not gather together as a church in light of a global pandemic. Everything in society was shut down, for presumably good reasons of protecting one another from a spreading virus that was infecting and taking the lives of many people over many months.

Since that time over a year ago, things have been slowly opening up around us. Though our gatherings have involved a smaller number of people with a variety of limitations—such as masks or social distancing, none of which was ideal—we’ve taken the position over this last year as a church that it has been good and loving, under the circumstances, for people of any health condition to feel as safe as possible when we come together as a church. We could have opened up to a lot more people sooner as a church, taken off the masks, decreased the distance and said, “If you have concerns about COVID, you’re free to stay home.” But that’s not what we said. We actually said we want this to be as safe a place as possible for you to come, regardless of your level of concern about COVID.

I think about one woman in her 80s who came up to one of our leaders here in the lobby and said, “I would not feel comfortable being here if you all did not have the precautions and protocols you have in place. Thank you for making this a safe place for me to be with my church.”

I think about a number of people who have had COVID, including myself, who have been in a gathering. By God’s grace and the protocols and precautions we’ve had in place, we’ve not had a spreading event—which for us as a large church is something we certainly should give God glory for and express gratitude to Him for.

So we believe it’s most loving to every member of our church to have these protocols in place, in light of the prevalence of COVID in our country, in light of waiting for months for vaccines to be available to anyone who wants to get a vaccine. Yet now, by God’s mercy, we’re into a new phase in our country where vaccines are available to anyone who wants them. Restrictions are being loosened as a result, which means we are adjusting our protocols and practices to begin moving back toward normal.

Now again, those protocols are different across different locations. We have different counties, even states, represented in our church family. So things are a bit different in, for example, Prince William County, Virginia, and Montgomery County, Maryland. This is why different location pastors today are walking through what re-opening looks like at those locations. In some of those locations, registration will no longer be necessary to attend a worship gathering. Temperature checks won’t be taking place anymore. Masks will be optional, though various locations will still have designated sections for those who want to keep a mask on and be around others who are wearing masks. So if you live in Metro Washington, DC, let me encourage you to go to mcleanbible.org and sign up for the e-news at the location that’s nearest you. Every week you will receive all the latest information you need on what the gathering looks like in that place.

The reason I’m sharing all of this with you is because I want to say, as pastorally as I can, based on God’s Word, that it’s time to break the dangerous habit of not meeting together physically as a church. I’m using that language intentionally, because there’s a point in God’s Word where He uses that exact same language with His people. Some of you may remember earlier this year, we did a series called “From

Surviving to Thriving.” I had a couple lemon trees up here and we talked about what it takes to nurture growth.

At one point in that series, Pastor Mike and I read from Hebrews 10 and we walked through 12 traits of a biblical church and that God has designed for each of us to thrive in our relationship with Him. I want to bring us back to that text, but I want us to pay particularly close attention to the language at the very end of this passage.

Hebrews 10:19-21 says, *“Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God...”* Basically these verses summarize the gospel—the good news that God has made a way for us to be reconciled to relationship with Him, to be forgiven of our sin by Jesus’ death on the cross and resurrection from the grave. In light of this good news, verse 22 says, *“Let us...”* You’re going to notice three times the author of Hebrews uses this phrase. This is what God in His Word is calling us to do together. The “us” is the church here. Continuing in verse 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. 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.

Now obviously these verses were not written after a year of global pandemic. But they were written during a day and a time when many followers of Jesus had gotten into the habit of not meeting together. I think this text is very applicable to our day, knowing we live in a day when it has become the habit of some, even many. To some extent we have encouraged that with all the mandated protocols, but now some have developed this habit of not meeting together that God in His Word warns us against.

It’s really interesting when it says to “consider” how to stir up one another. You don’t really catch this in the English, but “consider” in the original language goes next to “one another.” This word consider means to give careful attention to one another, to express deep concern for one another. As I was meditating on this text, I realized that’s actually the reason we’ve not gathered together, out of consideration for each other, out of concern for the safety and wellbeing of each other. Or that’s the reason why we’ve gathered in limited ways with protocols in place. It’s been uncomfortable for many of us, but we’ve done it out of concern for each other, because we’ve considered each other. By God’s mercy, things are changing around us. I don’t say that lightly at all.

I look at places like India right now, where COVID has been spreading like wildfire and many people are dying. I think of one sister from India in our church family whose family in India right now is being ravaged by COVID. Or I think about Arlen, one of our pastors here at Tysons, whom you heard from earlier. He recently went to Cameroon for the funeral of his dad, who had died of COVID, and his dad’s

brother did the funeral. Then a week later, the brother contracted COVID and also died. So by no means is this pandemic over in the world. Far from it.

By God's mercy, we're in a part of the world where vaccinations are available for those who choose to get them. By God's mercy, we're at a point where, as best we know, loosening restrictions and protocols seems good and right as we consider one another. So for that reason, I want to encourage us together as a church family that it's time to break this habit of neglecting to meet together. If you are a part of the MBC church family here in Metro Washington, DC, I want to encourage you today to begin moving back toward physically gathering with the church, as it's appropriate and possible.

Then, if you're not a part of MBC, maybe you've been joining in from beyond Metro Washington, DC. I hope that joining in during this last year has been an encouragement to you spiritually. It has been awesome to have so many people joining in from different states and countries around the world every week. There's a sense in which we have loved that and our services will continue to be aired online. The sermons are on podcast. There are tons of resources at mcleanbible.org and radical.net. We want to be an encouragement to you in the broader church. We don't want to be a substitute for what God has designed—a local, physical, in-the-flesh church near you—to do in your relationship with Him and with one another in the church. I realize that saying this may reduce our online numbers, but we want far more for you to be in a living, breathing church, gathering where you are on a week-by-week basis, because this is what it means to be the church.

I realize even that statement may sound foreign or even outdated to some of you. People might think, "This is the twenty-first century, a new day; the world's been turned upside down. We can just do church from home or wherever else online. Can't we hear God's Word and worship and grow in Christ from here, actually in a lot of ways that are better for me or my family? Can't I just do church from a distance?"

Again, if you are bedridden, or if you are deployed in the military, or traveling one week, church from a distance may be your only option. But for most of us, we have the option of gathering physically with a church. And where we have that option, God in His Word calls us to meet together. That's the language here: to draw near to God together, to hold fast to our hope together. "Let us draw near, let us hold fast, let us consider how to stir one another up to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together."

Apparently, according to Hebrews 10, these things cannot happen if we are neglecting to meet together. The implication of this text seems to be clear, that God has designed hopeful good things to happen in your life, and in others' lives, in the church when you meet together. So neglecting to meet together actually leads to unhelpful, dangerous things in your life. This is straight from God's Word.

I know that even as I say this, some of you might think, "Yeah, I'm not convinced that I can't just do church as well from here as if I was there." You may even be wondering, "Are you trying to cajole me

into coming back to church?” I assure you I have no desire to cajole you, or as my mom might say, to “sweet talk” someone into doing something. I only want to encourage you to do something when God in His Word is encouraging you to do something. Don’t listen to anything a pastor encourages you to do if they cannot show it to you in God’s Word.

So let’s ask this: Does God in His Word tell us to meet together—to physically gather together as His church—in a way that cannot normally be accomplished if we’re distanced from one another? That certainly seems to be what Hebrews 10:25 is saying, but let’s look a little deeper. Let’s go cover to cover in the Bible where I think we’ll see the answer is, “Yes. From beginning to end in the Bible, God tells His people, over the course of century after century after century, to physically assemble together for their good and for His glory.”

It’s interesting that even the word for “church” in the Bible—*ecclesia*—literally means an assembly. In other words, it’s part of the essence of the church to assemble together. Which means that if a church doesn’t normally assemble, then it’s not actually a church. By its very nature, church necessitates assembling. This has been true throughout the history of God’s people, even before God’s people were a church.

Remember when God formed His people, the people of Israel, in the Old Testament? He delivered them out of slavery in Egypt and physically gathered them together at Mt. Sinai to behold His glory and to hear His Word. Then listen to the way the Bible describes that moment when God entered into covenant relationship with His people in Deuteronomy 9:10. Moses says, “*And the Lord gave me the two tablets of stone written with the finger of God, and on them were all the words that the Lord had spoken with you on the mountain out of the midst of the fire on the day of the assembly.*” This word “assembly” becomes the common way God’s people are described throughout the Old Testament. It was a physical gathering of people.

Let me give you a few examples throughout the history of God’s people:

- Judges 20:2, “*And the chiefs of all the people, of all the tribes of Israel, presented themselves in the assembly of the people of God.*”
- 1 Kings 8:14, “*Then the king turned around and blessed all the assembly of Israel, while all the assembly of Israel stood.*”. This is the dedication of the temple when they were assembled together
- 1 Chronicles 28:8, “*Now therefore in the sight of all Israel, the assembly of the Lord*”—that’s who God’s people are described as, 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.*”
- Nehemiah 8:1-2, “*And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the Lord had commanded Israel. So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly.*”

This was the pattern of God’s people throughout the Old Testament. What’s interesting is most of the Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew, whereas most of the New Testament was originally written in Greek. You’ll never guess what the Greek translation of this Old Testament word “assembly” is. It’s *ecclesia*, the word the New Testament uses to describe the church. When the Bible describes a local church, God says, “Here’s what a local church is—it’s an assembly. It’s a gathering of people.” This is why you then see phrases all over the New Testament about the church physically being gathered together. There are tons of places I could show you this. For the sake of time, I’ll just camp out in the book we’re walking through right now, 1 Corinthians. Listen to the language the Bible uses here.

- 1 Corinthians 11:18, *“For, in the first place, when you come together as a church...”* To be a church involves coming together.
- 1 Corinthians 14:23, *“If, therefore, the whole church comes together...”* See the connection between assembly and coming together? The church is described as a meeting together.
- 1 Corinthians 14:19, *“Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue.”* He’s not talking about a particular building; he’s talking about in this assembly. When the church is gathered together, So “in church,” he’s talking about an event, a meeting, a gathering of God’s people and what he does in that gathering.
- 1 Corinthians 14:28 uses the same language about speaking in tongues. We’ll study this more when we get to this part of 1 Corinthians, but just listen to the language for now. *“But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silent in church”* —in the assembly—*“and speak to himself and to God.”*

This language makes total sense when you think about what the church is and what the church does. The church is not just a group of isolated individuals distant from one another. The church is a group of people who gather together, doing things with one another that they can’t normally do apart from each other.

Traits of a Biblical Church

So let’s just think about those 12 traits of a biblical church that we talk about at MBC.

First, there’s **biblical preaching and teaching**. We might think, “Well, can’t I just listen to biblical preaching and teaching online?” Absolutely you can. I do. I listen to others teach God’s Word during the week. I would encourage you to listen to as much biblical teaching as will help you grow in Christ. But do you remember that picture among God’s people throughout the Old Testament when they would assemble together to hear His Word, like they did at Mt. Sinai and like they did in Nehemiah 8:1-2? *“And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the Lord had commanded Israel. So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly.”* The rest of that passage goes on to talk about how they all heard God’s Word together in this assembly.

Then one of my favorite passages in the Old Testament is actually a passage I remember reading in my quiet time when God renewed my desire and calling to pastor in a local church. It's 2 Chronicles 34:29-30. Listen to this language:

Then the king [Josiah] sent and gathered together all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem. And the king went up to the house of the Lord, with all the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem and the priests and the Levites, all the people both great and small. And he read in their hearing all the words of the Book of the Covenant that had been found in the house of the Lord.

They assembled together to hear God's Word. They didn't just spread it out in different places; they assembled together to hear it. So based on that picture in the Old Testament, then it's no surprise to turn the pages to the New Testament and read in a place like Colossians 3:16, "*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.*" Teaching and admonishing one another, singing songs, hymns and spiritual songs—that can't happen if you're not with one another.

So yes, we can be taught the Bible at different times, but at some point we need to gather together, like God's people have gathered throughout history, to hear God's Word. This has been the pattern of God's people since the beginning of the Bible.

The same goes for **biblical prayer**. Of course, you and I can and should pray all the time alone. But from the very beginning of the church, in Acts 4:24 we read, "*And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, 'Sovereign Lord...'*" The church was constantly gathering together to pray and fast. Biblical discipleship involves being together, sharing life together. We've talked before about how Deuteronomy 6:6-9 gives us a powerful picture of Old Testament discipleship, when the Bible says these words:

And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Obviously talking about the Word like this, encouraging one another with the Word, helping each other obey the commands of God, necessitates sharing a life together, being together. Which, by the way, I would say even the mention of children here. As we open up more and more, we are adding more and more ministry to children, students and those with special needs, in different ways at different locations. This requires more and more people in our church family to teach God's Word to children, students and those with special needs, helping them grow in their relationships with God. We place a priority as a church family on passing the good news of Who God is and what God has done on to the next generation. This involves all of us working together toward that end. So I want to challenge you, not just to come back to a

church gathering, but come back to church serving. This involves all of us: single adults, married adults, young adults, senior adults, with kids, without kids. It doesn't matter.

We need all hands-on deck to serve, if we're going to be the church God has designed us to be, helping each other grow in Christ. Nobody can sit on the sidelines. I want to see everybody engaged in doing Hebrews 10, meeting together to encourage one another in a way that you can't do from your living room. This is one of the reasons we physically gather together for biblical discipleship in each other's lives.

Then there's **biblical evangelism**. This is something we can do and need to do in our living rooms, in our homes, wherever we work, wherever we go in the city or wherever we go in the world. Yes, we need to share the gospel. We also gather together physically to proclaim the gospel and lead people to Jesus. We invite people who don't know Jesus to come to church, to assemble with us, so they might hear the gospel and come to faith in Jesus.

I met a young woman the other day who came to faith in Jesus at one of our outdoor gatherings over this last year. I think about Colleen, Judah, Nadine, Mumbe and Jompa, a Tibetan refugee from a Buddhist background. All of them came to Christ through just one of our gatherings a couple weeks ago. It's biblical to invite people to church gatherings for evangelism. Listen to 1 Corinthians 14:23-25:

If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your minds? But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you.

What a picture! May this happen every week as we gather together. When you and I invite people who don't know God, who don't know Jesus, and they come in and see God being worshiped and hear God's Word being proclaimed, may they see worship around us in a way that says, "This is different. God is here. I want to know God and worship God alongside you." They will worship God and declare, "God is really among you." That happens when? When "the whole church comes together."

I'd be remiss if I didn't pause at this point and invite those of you who are watching or listening right now who have not come to the point where you've trusted in Jesus as the Savior and Lord of your life. I invite you to be a part of our physical church gatherings. As you're exploring Christianity, as you're thinking about questions of faith, as you're walking through whatever you're walking through in life, I hope you hear today that there is a God Who loves you so much that He has sent His Son to pay the price for the sins of anyone who will trust in His love.

God has made a way for you to be forgiven of all your sins against Him. He has made a way for you to have eternal life with Him if you will trust in Jesus. We want to proclaim and sing this every single time we gather together in a way that we hope you will see God is among us and that you will join us in

worshiping Him as your life. So biblical evangelism happens when we come together as a church—not just when we scatter together.

Then **biblical fellowship**—think of the 59 “one another” commands we see in Scripture. Almost all of them necessitate being together. Think Romans 12:4-5: *“For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.”* We’re going to talk about biblical membership in a second, but just see how these go together. Keep going to verses 6-8:

Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.

Look at all those things. Those things aren’t happening in your living room or from behind a screen. Those things are happening when the church meets together as members of a body, of an assembly.

That takes us to **biblical membership**. Those verses speak of one body with many members. To be a member of a church is to be a part, a member, of an assembly, of a people, who come together under **biblical leadership**. We’ve talked about this before, but think about passages like Hebrews 13:17 where God says, *“Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.”* So who are your leaders? God’s telling you to obey the leaders in the church. Who are they? They’re the pastors, elders, overseers, deacons—the leaders of the assembly where you meet. They are the people who are keeping watching over your souls.

There’s so much we could talk about here, but we will be talking about this in a couple weeks, including some concentrated time in 1 Corinthians, talking about men and women in the church, elders, pastors and overseers in the church.

I’ll just say at this point: we are working very hard, and have been this past year, and will be all the more in the next couple months, as we start to re-open. We want to get to the point where every single member of the MBC church family is known and prayed for and cared for by a pastor. I hear all the time, “I don’t know the elders or the pastors of my church.” Obviously, it’s not possible for every single elder or pastor to know every single person in a church this size. But we are going to work to raise up pastors all across our church family, to the point where every member of this body is known and cared for in a Hebrews 13:17 kind of way when we meet together. Again, the point now is that Hebrews 13:17 can’t happen when we’re isolated from one another.

The same is true for **biblical accountability and discipline**. Think about Matthew 18:15-18, where Jesus teaches us about church accountability and discipline. *“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.”* That’s happening outside the gathering of the church. *“But if he does not listen, take one or two others*

along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.” Again, that’s outside of the assembly. But then, listen to verse 17: “If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church...” —the assembly, the people of God gathered together. “And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” The word Jesus uses for “church” there is *ecclesia*, assembly. This is why, when you get to 1 Corinthians 5:4-5, the Bible is talking about doing this hard, loving work in the church, listen to the language there:

When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.

Again, there’s a ton we could talk about there, but the whole picture here is that this process of church discipline and accountability happens when we are assembled as the church. So you’re seeing how this assembling, this gathering together, is necessary. It’s not optional to be who the church is and to do what the church does.

Let look at the last four traits. Certainly this is the case with **biblical worship**. We’ve already read this in Colossians 3, but I’ll show it to you in one other place as well. Ephesians 5:18-21 says:

And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Did you hear that language? “Addressing one another.” When we sing, we’re not just singing to a screen; we’re not just singing to the air. We sing songs of praise to God, but we also sing songs of encouragement to one another, with our “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.” So is it possible to worship God on your own, to sing on your own from your living room or wherever you might be? Yes. But God has designed for us to address one another. This is His Word, in the church, through psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. That can only happen when we’re meeting together.

Again, this has been the case for God’s people throughout history. There are tons of places we could go to, but to summarize look at Psalm 95:1-2. “Oh come, let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation! Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!” Let’s do this together. Verses six and seven say, “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.”

This is what we do when we meet together. We make noise together—more noise than when it is just one of us alone. We make noise together. We sing loud songs of praise to God. “Make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!...Make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!” In worship, we are meeting together before God. Just let that soak in.

There's a meeting happening between a group of people, an assembly of people, and God. Do you know what that's called in the Bible? It's called church. An assembly of people giving glory to God. So be a part of that. It's what God has called His people to be a part of.

Let me add one note here, because one of the challenges that I think has been new for many families and parents specifically during this season has been having children with you in worship—first in your home, then as we've gathered together with limited children's ministry. I've seen all kinds of families coming in together with children of different ages. I realize this has been hard, but I just want to encourage you, moms and dads, from God's Word. I think about Nehemiah 12 and an awesome assembly of God's people together for worship. The Bible specifically describes this as all of God's people, of all ages. Look at this summary statement in Nehemiah 12:43: *"They offered great sacrifices that day and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy; the women and children also rejoiced."*

They could have just said, "all the people" which was implied in "they." But it makes certain to point out that this was everybody, specifically mentioning women and children. I've got to imagine that not every child among the thousands and thousands of people of Israel was sitting or standing and perfectly. That's a lot of people. I'm guessing it was a mess, in a sense, but it was a beautiful mess before God. All of God's people, of all ages, gathered for worship before God in a way that was honoring Him. It says they rejoiced with great joy. This is an awesome picture. It goes on to say, *"And the joy of Jerusalem was heard far away."* They were rejoicing with joy, even in the middle of the mess.

So if you're in worship with your kids and they're making some noises here and there, please know that we will rejoice with you. One, because every parent has been there at some point. And two, because we rejoice that you are prioritizing the spiritual health of your children. If your child has special needs and makes noises here or there, know that we as a church family are so thankful for you and for that child and all that's involved in you bringing them to this assembly.

Think about how Jesus welcomed the children to Himself. He said the Kingdom belongs to such as these. We must prioritize passing the gospel on to the next generation. That's a core conviction we have here. As part of that conviction, don't underestimate the biblical beauty and value of all God's people being together in worship. The whole point we come back to is this: God has designed His people to assemble together for worship before Him.

Then to celebrate **biblical ordinances** is part also of our worship—baptism and the Lord's Supper. We baptize when we come together, because baptism is a picture of identification, not just with the person of Christ, but also with the body of Christ. We're going to study Lord's Supper more in a couple weeks, but for now, 1 Corinthians 11:18 and 33 both say, *"When you come together as a church..."* This is why we've not participated in the Lord's Supper online, but only in person. Biblically this is a physical meal that the physically gathered people of God take together when they come together as the church.

Then **biblical giving**. First Corinthians 16:1-2 says, *“Concerning the collection for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come.”* In this picture, it seems pretty clear there was an expectation for giving to be a part of the gathering of the church each week. We’ll talk about more about this as we get to the end of 1 Corinthians.

The final trait of a biblical church is **biblical mission**. Obviously this happens as we’re making disciples of the nations, going places where the gospel has not yet gone. Where does this impulse to go to the nations start, this sending out of missionaries to other places? Look at Acts 13:2: *“While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.”* Biblical mission begins when the church gathers for worship and prayer and fasting, and the Holy Spirit speaks in that gathering in ways that lead to the spread of the gospel among the nations.

Are you getting the picture here? Take an honest look at God’s Word. The church cannot be what God has designed the church to be, the church cannot do what God has designed the church to do if followers of Jesus neglect meeting together.

This is why, starting particularly today, based on the whole of God’s Word and specifically Hebrews 10, I want to call us to draw near to God *“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.”* I want to call us to *“hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.”* And I want to call us to consider one another, *“how to stir up one another to love and good works”* by *“not neglecting to meet together,”* as has become a habit, *“but encouraging one another”* as we meet together, *“and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”*

In the days to come, let’s start physically meeting together again, as the church, on Sundays whenever possible. Let’s start meeting together again in groups. Start exploring how to re-engage in regathering. If you’re not in Metro Washington, DC, do this with a local church where you live.

The last time we were in this text, in the middle of the series on “Surviving to Thriving,” we used two lemon trees. One of the trees we neglected and put in the dark. The other one we watered and fed. We gave it sunlight. We saw the difference over just one month with one tree being neglected and the other one being nourished. At the end of that series, one of our members volunteered to take the neglected one and try to nourish it back to life. We said, “It’s all yours.” I want to show you a picture of what happened as a result. Now, if you saw that tree when we gave it to this member, you would be shocked right now. It’s very impressive that this lemon tree is growing now.



I want to share this picture with you because I know this has been a hard year in so many ways. It's pretty safe to say that many of us have found ourselves withering in certain ways by not being able to do all we're designed to do as followers of Jesus. By God's mercy, we now have the opportunity to start nourishing that which has been withering, to meet instead of neglecting to meet, to start doing again what God has designed us to do as a church, as the family of brothers and sisters in Christ that we are. So let's take these steps together. Let's serve and grow in all the ways God has designed us to do.

Will you pray with me?

O God, I thank You for every single person who is listening or watching online right now. I thank You that amidst all our different circumstances, we have chosen to be part of this gathering right now online. God, I pray that You would make the way for as many of us as possible to begin to connect, or reconnect in many cases, with the assembly called Your church. Let us come together, meeting together, as You've designed for Your church. We pray that You would lead, guide, direct and bless this process of reconnection in ways that lead to flourishing in the days to come, for each of us individually and as families. I pray that this will take place in ways that lead to the enjoyment of You and all You've designed for our lives as members of Your church. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Permissions: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material provided that you do not alter it in any way, use the material in its entirety, and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. For web posting, a link to the media on our website is preferred. Any exceptions to the above must be approved by Radical.

All Scriptures are quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: By David Platt. © David Platt. Website: Radical.net