

# PERSPECTIVE

OCTOBER 2021

**THE ASSUMED  
BUT NEEDED  
BIBLICAL  
CASE FOR THE  
CHURCH AS**

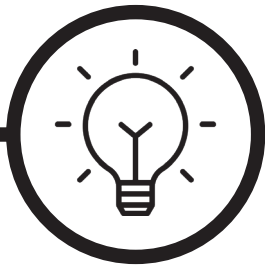
**ONE** 

**GATHERING**

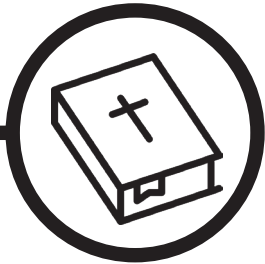
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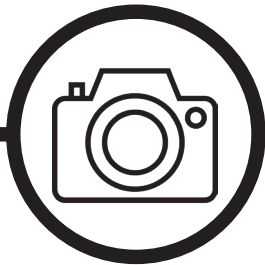
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## The Assumed but Needed Biblical Case for the Church as One Gathering

Eighteen months into the pandemic, church life has fully resumed for most Mount Vernon members. We share meals on Wednesday nights. We pray for one another in our living rooms at Covenant Groups. Hugs and handshakes are freely given on Sundays. We stand shoulder-to-shoulder to heartily sing God's praises and sit closely to hear the Word preached.

That's the weekly experience for most but not all of us. Covid continues to prevent some from being united with the body by fully regathering. Some watch the livestream at home. Others gather in the Fellowship Hall for distanced-seating. Sadly, some members have recently become homebound because of health complications. I'm thankful for each member's effort to connect with the church as they have seen fit during this pandemic.

Our goal, however, is for every physically capable member to gather together in the Main Hall for corporate worship. As recently announced, the livestream will be offered through November 21, 2021, and a secondary gathering space through March 13, 2022.

How do we go from where we are today to being one gathering?

For one, we remember that when God created the church, he made a beautiful display of his glory and grace. The church is a visible manifestation of God's wisdom uniting Jew and Gentile as one body through the gospel (Eph. 3:4–11). The church represents God, albeit imperfectly, on earth to a watching world. Thus, God cares about the unity of the church. We should do nothing as members or leaders to introduce division that subverts God's plan for visible unity (1 Cor. 1:10–17, 11:17–22; Gal. 3:23; Phil. 2:1–4; Jam. 2:1–7). His wisdom, power, grace, and love are on display when the church lives as one body, one family, and united citizens of God's kingdom (Mt. 5:2–16; Jn. 13:35, 17:20–23; Eph. 4:1–6; 1 Tim. 3:15). Pray fervently the Lord would maintain unity at Mount Vernon.

We also move toward being one gathering by being convinced that this is God's will for the church. We must see our gathering as necessary for our corporate discipleship. My prayer for this article is that the Lord will use it to deeply convince you that *a local church is a people who gather as one assembly* and that you will

make concrete steps to help Mount Vernon again be one gathering in the near future.

### WHY GATHER?

The church as an assembly is a much-discussed topic over the last eighteen months. All churches were challenged by Covid, but many were not concerned about the division introduced by their livestream and multiple services or gathering locations. In fact, even before Covid, some churches already provided such outlets in an effort to expand their ministry. Not so for Mount Vernon. We remain committed to one gathering at one location in one room. That should still be our commitment based on these six biblical truths about the church as one gathering.

### First, the church is a gathering.

A local church is, by definition, an assembly. A church is more than a gathering but not less than one. The Greek word translated church—*ekklesia*—means “assembly.” *Ekklesia* is translated “church” in places like Matthew 16:18 and elsewhere. It is also used to refer to assemblies of non-church gatherings. Stephen referred to the congregation of Israel as an *ekklesia* (Acts 7:38). Luke used the word multiple times to refer to the people that “assembled” to riot against Christians in Ephesus (Acts 19:32, 39–41).

You don't have to know Greek to see how the early churches assembled “together.” When Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch, they “gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles” (Acts 14:27). Part of the Corinthians' problem was their mishandling of the Lord's Supper and spiritual gifts when they came “together as a church” (1 Cor. 11:18, 20, 33; 14:23). The church is, by definition, a people who assemble together regularly.

### Second, churches are commanded to gather.

We're witnessing the effect of persecution in Afghanistan as the Taliban regime targets Christians. Churches struggle to gather for fear of death. The Christians to whom Hebrews was written knew persecution (Heb. 10:32–34; 13:3). Their temptation may have been to not gather in order to avoid it. Yet, they were instructed to not neglect meeting together, which some were in the habit of doing (Heb. 10:25).

There are good reasons why we're not always able to gather. For homebound members, their failing bodies make gathering too difficult. But, where possible, we are to obey the command to gather.

### **Third, Jesus is uniquely present with his church when they gather.**

God is always with his people by his Spirit. His Spirit lives within us; we're his temple (1 Cor. 6:19–20). We can courageously make disciples of all nations because Jesus promised he would be with us “always, to the end of the age” (Mt. 28:20). As Christians, God, by his Spirit, never abandons us.

Jesus, however, promised he would be uniquely present with his church when they gather. As Colin Hansen and Jonathan Leeman write, “Our assembled local churches represent God’s presence with man—where heaven comes to earth.”<sup>i</sup> Whether the church is two people or two thousand, King Jesus is among them when they gather in his name (Mt. 18:20).

### **Fourth, God’s plan has always been to gather his people from all nations into his presence.**

The first gathering of God’s people was not in an ornate cathedral but a garden. Adam and Eve ruled over creation and enjoyed God’s presence in the garden of Eden (Gen. 2). When Israel entered the promised land, they were instructed to assemble regularly at the temple where God dwelt (Deut. 16:16; 31:10–12, 30). The prophets promised that one day God’s anointed would gather his exiled people into his presence for joyful worship (Joel 2:15–16).

God wants to be with his people. That is seen most clearly in the incarnation. God the Son took on human flesh to live with his people. John wrote, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (Jn. 1:14; cf. 1:1–4). Jesus is “Immanuel, God with us” (Mt. 1:27).

God’s people anticipate perfect worship in eternity with their Savior. They await the final assembly to worship the Lamb who was slain (Rev. 19:6–10; 21:3; 22:1–5). We will assemble *together* to worship our Savior, Jesus Christ, forever! Our earthly gatherings prepare us for that eternal gathering.

### **Fifth, there are things we’re commanded to do only when we gather as a church.**

Sadly, in some churches, baptisms are private affairs after the worship service for invited friends and family. That’s not what God intended. Baptism is a public act of discipleship signifying one has a new family in a local church (Acts 16:15; Eph. 4:4–6). It is to be administered

when the church gathers. The same is true for the Lord’s Supper. We partake of it together signifying we are one body (1 Cor. 11:17–33). Membership decisions are not made by the elders but by the church when it gathers (Mt. 18:17; 1 Cor. 5:4–5, 12; 2 Cor. 2:6–7).

This is why the elders of Mount Vernon postponed celebrating the Lord’s Supper and taking in new members during the darkest days of the pandemic. It’s also why we do not livestream Church in Conferences. Partaking of the ordinances is a visible display of the congregation’s unity and is only to be done when we gather. Receiving and removing members is an act of congregational authority only to be exercised when we gather.

### **Sixth, the church gathers to hear from God through the preaching of his Word.**

I’m thankful for the livestream during this unusual season in the church’s life. We should, however, note that its biggest problem is that it separates the teaching of God’s Word from the gathering of God’s people. His Word has always been central to his people gathering. When the people came back to Jerusalem from exile, Nehemiah and the priests gathered them as one assembly to teach them God’s Word. Through the corporate preaching, they lamented and repented of their sins and worshipped the Lord (Neh. 8:1–8, 13–18; 9:1–38).

The church was birthed in Jerusalem among Jews who, when filled with the Holy Spirit, gathered and “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching” (Acts 2:42). When disunity threatened to distract the apostles from teaching, they had the church set aside members to re-establish unity. Why didn’t the apostles lead the charge? They said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables... [W]e will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the Word” (Acts 6:2–4). Many things—even good things—can distract church leaders from keeping the Word central in the church.

Timothy served the church in Ephesus. Paul wrote to him wanting Christians to know how they “ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15). That required godly leadership. Timothy bore a lot of responsibility for leading the church. Central to his ministry was teaching Scripture (1 Tim. 4:6, 11–16; 2 Tim. 4:1–5). He could not lead the church to proper living unless he led with the Word and set an example of obedience.

At no other time in the history of the church have copies of Scripture and audio and video of sermons been so widely



available. Praise God! A church, however, is not scattered individuals listening to sermon audio or watching the same preacher at home. The church assembles to hear God's Word preached afresh each week. Members *gather* to hear what God has to say to *them* through his Word.

I hope these reasons convince you that a local church is a people who gather as one assembly. I'm thankful for how the livestream and multiple gathering spaces have allowed us to hear the same songs and messages at the same time during the pandemic. But let's desire to sing and hear them as one gathering.

### WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE DON'T GATHER?

Not gathering as one assembly can spiritually harm our corporate discipleship. In the long-run, something happens spiritually when we make substitutes for our gathering. A candy bar may help when your blood sugar drops quickly, but it's a terrible substitute for the hearty meal you need for the day. What happens when we don't gather and, instead, substitute it for a livestream or simulcast with a small group?

Let me first preface my comments. I assume most members genuinely want to be fully regathered in the Main Hall. Therefore, what follows is not intended by me to impute ill-motives but simply to state the spiritual implications of not gathering. Also, these implications are not equally applicable for everyone. Someone gathering in the Fellowship Hall for corporate worship but attending Sunday School or conversing with others after the service will not experience the same spiritual effects as someone only watching the livestream. Thus, please consider my comments in light of your personal participation in the church.

With that in mind, here are a few of the spiritual effects of not fully regathering.<sup>ii</sup>

**Most importantly, we miss the embodied experience of hearing the Word of God sung, prayed, read, and preached.**

I cried when we first regathered last June after two and half months of looking at a camera with ten people in the Main Hall. To see and hear people singing and listening to the preaching was moving. The echo of an "Amen!" in the room was overwhelming.

Corporate worship is not replicable on a livestream. You hear the ensemble's vocals and instrumentation. But it's not the immersive effect of the congregation singing in surround sound. You can listen to preaching on a

livestream, but preaching is more than communicating information. It's an embodied experience of seeing and hearing flesh and blood exposit Scripture and apply its meaning to the congregation. It is done together as you see others with their Bibles open, shaking their heads in agreement with the preacher.

There is something powerful about corporate worship as an embodied experience with a group of people. Hansen and Leeman noted the power of a crowd, saying:

Groups of people are powerful, not just for what happens when they gather, but for what that group *becomes* by gathering. The people in the group can become a movement. A force. The beginning of a change in the world, for better or worse. The whole is more than the sum of its parts... What makes gatherings so powerful? The fact that you are physically *there*. You see. You hear. You feel. Unlike watching something on a screen, in which you're bodily removed from the thing you're watching, a gathering literally surrounds you. It defines your entire reality... In a gathering, we experience what other people love, hate, fear, and believe, and our sense of *what's normal* and *what's right* can shift comparatively quickly. The loves, hates, fears, or beliefs of the crowd become ours. This isn't surprising. God also made us "imaging" creatures (see Gen. 1:26–28).<sup>iii</sup>

How many times have you been moved and changed by what you heard or sung and how you heard it or sung it *together with the church*?

**We remove ourselves from a necessary path of encouragement and shepherding.**

Think of that encouraging comment about the sermon when you turned to say hello to someone. What about the counsel you were given on the front steps after the service? Remember when that member prayed for you in the aisle? None of that would have happened had you not gathered.

We're told to "consider how to stir up one another to love and good works... [and] encourage one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near" (Heb. 10:24–25). That happens when we're devoted to "not neglecting to meet together" (v. 25a). Gathering keeps us in the path of encouragement.

It also keeps us in the path of pastoral care. During the shutdown, the elders tried to shepherd through calls, texts, etc. When our gatherings were taken away, we immediately realized how much shepherding happens

by regularly being together. They provide the best opportunity for elders to “shepherd the flock of God that is *among you*” (1 Pet. 5:2).

### **We make Christian discipleship individualistic, not corporate.**

This is may be the most spiritually harmful effect of permanently substituting gathering for a livestream. It’s easy to think less about others when you don’t see them. It’s hard to care for someone in tangible ways when you’re rarely together. Seeing the congregation on the livestream may make you miss them. It may stir up feelings of longing and being connected. But your connection to the church becomes just that—sentimental feelings.

Our “connection” to other members is to be more concrete. It’s more embodied, more life-on-life. We’re to “do good to everyone, especially to those who are of the household of faith” (Gal. 6:10). We’re to “share our own selves” with one another (1 Thess. 2:8). Yes, that happens in Covenant Groups and by being hospitable in your home. But those relational connections begin when we gather together, not by watching a livestream at home.

Covid introduced disunity in churches physically and principally as Christians disagree over the efficacy and necessity of masks and vaccinations. Awkward conversations and loving disagreements over these things are easily avoided when you don’t gather. But when you do, we get the “messy” relational privilege of corporate discipleship. In gathering, you experience the need to “do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves” (Phil. 2:3).

“Gathering virtually” through a livestream shifts Christian discipleship from a corporate to an individualistic effort. It makes the Christian walk about the quality of the worship ensemble and the ability of the preacher to deliver a service to our homes. Our walk with the Lord becomes largely about our faithfulness in private prayer and Scripture reading. Love in word and deed is shown to family and close friends instead of the congregation. Our Christian discipleship is to be corporate. Gathering regularly as one assembly keeps us on the path “to walk[ing] in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph. 4:1–3).

### **CONCLUSION**

A member recently expressed deep gratitude for being

fully regathered. She contrasted it with the restricted gatherings from the prior twelve months. She simply said, “I was thankful for the measures we took to slowly resume church life. It was necessary... But it just wasn’t the same. It’s just different when we’re all together.”

That statement revealed her appreciation for God’s plan for his church. There is just something different when we’re all together. That’s not ultimately because of who we are but because who is among us—King Jesus! He promised, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them” (Mt. 18:20).

– Brad Thayer

<sup>i</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>ii</sup> Much of this is influenced and inspired by Hansen & Leeman in *Rediscovering Church*, “Do We Really Need to Gather?”

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid., pgs. 45–46. Authors’ emphasis.

## Service: How Do I Give Back?

Written by Mez McConnell

Since the dawn of Christianity, the lives of believers have been marked by serving others. In fact, throughout the ministry of Christ, we see Jesus himself as the “suffering servant.” In *Service: How Do I Give Back?*, Mez McConnell dedicates 100 pages to the Christian virtue of service.

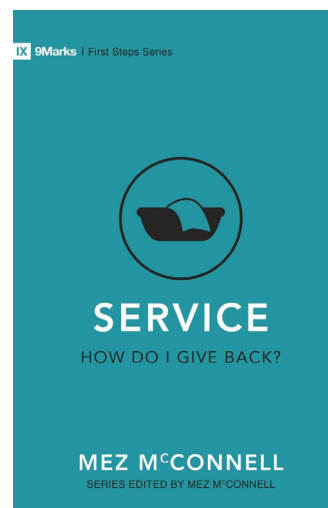
McConnell helpfully dedicates nine chapters to common questions a new Christian might raise about service to others based on Jesus’ instructions in Ephesians 4:11-13. As intended, the book is a very good resource for introducing a newer believer to some fundamental tenants of the faith. McConnell uses a fictitious character named “James” to provide role-playing scenarios for use in evangelistic efforts. Because the book is aimed toward Christians newer to the faith, McConnell is diligent to provide scriptural evidence in support of his arguments, ensuring his message is rooted in the Word.

The nature of God’s grace can be difficult for unbelievers to comprehend. It is not uncommon for more mature Christians to wrestle with the unmerited favor of their salvation. McConnell addresses this head-on in his first chapter, “Can God use someone like me?” In answering this simple, but profound question, McConnell is faithful to remind the reader that, throughout Scripture, the Lord uses unlikely heroes to accomplish his will and to ultimately bring glory to his name.

At the most fundamental level, our motivation for serving is that we have been served. We have been reconciled to Christ, not because of anything we have done, but solely based on the mercy of God manifest in the work of Jesus. I found McConnell’s chapter, “What’s My Motivation for Serving?” to be a high point in the book. Directing the reader to Titus 3, McConnell clearly reminds us of the gospel. The motivation for our service to others is quite simply to regularly and deliberately remember the grace we have received.

I found this book very instructive in helping me think through discipling a newer Christian or an evangelistic setting where I might be questioned about serving others. The concerns and objections raised by “James” were common and the book was helpful in equipping me to answer with confidence.

— RECOMMENDED BY GARRY HILL



### Excerpts From the Book

## 1

“The only thing that can drive our service, and keep it going when the going gets tough, is God’s glory. It’s not about us! That’s what frees us to serve. It’s not about our capacity—it’s not about our background: whether we’ve been morally good all our lives or been to the bottom of the pit and back again. It’s only ever about God and what he can do with and through sinners, for His glory.”

—Can God Use Someone Like Me?, p.22

## 2

“When we become Christians we are not simply saved to enjoy a personal relationship with God; we are rescued from our individualism and isolationism. By being brought into a relationship with God we are brought into relationship with others.”

—Who Should We Serve?, p.47

## 3

“Heaven is only populated with servants because the King of Heaven is Himself the greatest servant of all.”

—What If I Don’t Want to Serve?, p.59

# OCTOBER

*These Scripture readings have been selected to help you prepare for the Sunday morning message. Take Up & Read!*

October 1	Ephesians 5	<b>October 17</b>	<b>Acts 20:28–38</b>
October 2	Ephesians 6	October 18	1 Timothy 4:6–16
<b>October 3</b>	<b>Acts 20:13–27</b>	October 19	Hebrews 12:3–17
October 4	Romans 2:25–29	October 20	Matthew 7:7–23
October 5	Colossians 2:6–15	October 21	Psalms 6
October 6	Galatians 5:16–26	October 22	Matthew 19:16–30
October 7	Acts 15:1–21	October 23	Matthew 25:1–13
October 8	1 Corinthians 3:16–23	<b>October 24</b>	<b>Luke 13:22–35</b>
October 9	1 Peter 2:1–8	October 25	Romans 1:1–17
<b>October 10</b>	<b>Ephesians 2:11–22</b>	October 26	Romans 1:18–32
October 11	1 Timothy 1	October 27	Romans 2:1–12
October 12	Psalms 79	October 28	Romans 2:12–29
October 13	1 Timothy 2	October 29	Romans 3:1–8
October 14	1 Timothy 3	October 30	Romans 3:9–26
October 15	1 Timothy 4	<b>October 31</b>	<b>Romans 3:27–4:8</b>
October 16	1 Timothy 5		<b>*Sermons in bold</b>

# TAKE UP & READ



# NEW MEMBERS

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Dalton  
Crosby



John  
Folmar



Keri  
Folmar



Joanna  
Tantipongpipat



Michael  
Wilson



*Mount Vernon*  
BAPTIST CHURCH