



Is Corporate Worship Necessary?

Introduction

There are many distinct and edifying forms of Christian worship—private devotions, family worship, small groups, bible studies, and more. All of our life is meant to be lived as worship to God!

But, how necessary is corporate worship in the life of a believer? If we have informal contexts where we can pray for others, care for others, and get to know others more intimately, why bother with corporate worship? Can we not just connect with other Christians throughout the week? Do we really need to gather together weekly? More importantly, does the Bible teach us to gather weekly? Does the Bible teach that corporate worship is necessary?

Corporate worship gets its name from the idea of the body (or corpus) of Christ gathering to meet with God in public worship on the Lord's Day. We would argue that this distinct form of worship is both biblical and essential to the life of the Christian.

A Brief Look Into 1 Corinthians 11:18

In Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth, he begins to articulate a correction in chapter 11 with these words: "*when you come together as a church...*" This little phrase indicates several important things about corporate worship.

First, it indicates that there was a unique gathering "as a church" that was not the same as a few Christians hanging out and talking about Jesus throughout the week.

Second, it indicates that there is a definitive time to gather—"when you gather"—meaning there is a time when this is happening and there is a time when it is not happening.

Third, the use of the plural pronoun "you" indicates that this gathering is more than a group of individuals, but a group of individuals that gather together as one.

Fourth, this point is further emphasized by defining this group as "a church," indicating this group of individuals that gather together as one is a church. Why does he add gather together "as a church"? Why not just say "when you gather"? Because when believers gather together in distinct, clearly-defined, communities of believers under the authority of the Word, they gather together as a church.

It is right to say, "the church is a people, not a building." (We heartily agree, especially since we do not have a building!) The church is the redeemed people of God. However, overemphasizing that

fact that the church is a people could subtly undermine the importance of a particular people gathering in a particular place.

In fact, in line with Paul's distinction in 1 Corinthians 11:18, there's a sense in which a church is not a church until it comes together. It would be more accurate to say that the church is a distinct people assembled in a specific place. Jonathan Leeman helpfully explains,

“Regular assembling or gathering makes a church a church. This doesn't mean a church stops being a church when the people aren't gathered, any more than a soccer team stops being a team when the members aren't playing. The point is, regularly gathering together is necessary for a church to be a church, just like a team has to gather to play in order to be a team.”

Moreover, while all believers are a part of the church universal, this verse—along with many others in the NT—assumes that believers are gathering together in local churches, in distinct, clearly defined, communities of believers in specific places. In fact, unsurprisingly, the overwhelming majority of references to church in the NT are to local churches—distinct, clearly defined, communities of believers in specific places.

When we gather together as one on the Lord's Day, we do not gather together as a group of individuals, we gather together as a church, in a way unlike any other time we gather with other believers.

Overview of the Bible

The principles behind 1 Corinthians are found throughout the Bible. In fact, 1 Corinthians 11:18 is just a single example among many that direct our attention to the necessity and blessing of corporate worship.

Though we cannot exhaustively cover all the biblical content in this short paper, we hope that the following will serve as a well-orbed overview of the importance of corporate worship:

1. The glorious purpose of the Exodus was to gather a people who assemble together to worship God.

“Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel. (Ex 19:5–6)

Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. (Ex 19:17)

“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.” (Dt 9:10)

2. The books of Leviticus, Numbers, & Deuteronomy outline what it looks for this people to worship the holy God together. The assembly is always in view. The Hebrew word *qahal*, meaning assembly, is repeated over 20 times in those two books.

The center of the camp in the wilderness was the tent of meeting, the place where they met with God and offered sacrifices to him.

The people are commanded to assemble to offer sacrifices, observe the consecration of priests, & celebrate various feasts throughout the year.

At times, the people & the assembly are used interchangeably, indicating that the people of God are people who assemble together. For instance, "*Why have you brought the assembly of the LORD into this wilderness, that we should die here, both we and our cattle?*" (Num 20:4).

3. The high-point of the history of Israel is the dedication of the temple in Jerusalem. There, the whole congregation of Israel assembled and "the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord" (1 Kings 8:11).

Then Solomon said, "The LORD has said that he would dwell in thick darkness. I have indeed built you an exalted house, a place for you to dwell in forever." Then the king turned around and blessed all the assembly of Israel, while all the assembly of Israel stood. (1 Kings 8:12–14).

4. At other key junctures in Israel's history, the nation gathered as an assembly before their covenant Lord.

And the chiefs of all the people, of all the tribes of Israel, presented themselves in the assembly of the people of God, 400,000 men on foot that drew the sword. (Judges 20:2)

Now therefore in the sight of all Israel, 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. (1 Chr 28:8)

5. The psalms are filled with joyful references to gathering together with the congregation to worship God.

I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the LORD!" (Ps 122:1)

How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts! My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God. (Ps 84:1–2)

Praise the LORD! Sing to the LORD a new song, his praise in the assembly of the godly! (Ps 149:1)

6. Likely beginning during the exile, the Jews assemble in for mutual encouragement & instruction in the Scriptures.

Regardless of when it was established, this practice of assembling together for mutual encouragement & instruction began to take place in local synagogues, literally translated the "place of assembly." Such that, it was the clear practice of Jews in the first century to gather in synagogues on the Sabbath.

Before beginning his teaching ministry, it was Jesus' custom to go to the synagogue on the Sabbath day. *"And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read"* (Lk 4:16).

If anyone had reasons to not assemble, surely it is Jesus! Who could teach him anything?

7. The word in the Greek translation of the OT for "assembly," *ekklesia*, is the same word the NT writers use to refer to the local church. In the OT, it is the word for gathering together and is intentionally used by the authors of the NT to emphasize the importance of gathering to the local church.

To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours. (1 Cor 1:2)

The churches of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house, send you hearty greetings in the Lord. (1 Cor 16:19)

8. The language of temple and dwelling place that is used in the OT to refer to the place of assembling for corporate worship is applied to the church.

Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. (Eph 2:20–22)

Do you not know that you [plural] are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you [plural]? (1 Cor 3:16)

We are the temple of the living God. (2 Cor 7:16)

The application of this language to the church underlines the importance of gathering and assembling together. A local church is an assembly. If a church never meets, it is no church at all. God has saved us as individuals to be a corporate assembly.

9. The metaphors of the church emphasize this corporate identity.

Members of the Body: 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. (Rom 12:4-5)

Citizens of the Kingdom: Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ...So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God. (Eph 2:12-13,19)

Children in God's Family: But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. (John 1:12-13)

Stones in a Temple: As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 2:4-5)

Bride of Christ: Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. (Eph 5:25-27)

10. Local churches in the NT gather together regularly.

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? (1 Cor 14:23)

“Whole church” indicates there is a quantifiable group that has gathered.

11. A church assembly is a distinct event.

Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue. (1 Cor 14:19)

Paul provides instructions on what a believer should do “in church” referring to a distinct meeting.

12. Individual believers gathered together as one body in the New Testament.

Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico. (Acts 5:12)

“All together” indicates there was a defined group of individuals joined together to comprise a whole.

13. The New Testament writers instruct churches to do activities that can only be done by meeting together.

Sing to one another: 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. (Acts 5:12)

Serve one another: From whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. (Eph 4:16)

Hear the reading of Scripture: Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. (1 Tim 4:13)

Hear the preaching of Scripture: Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. (2 Tim 4:2)

Participate in church discipline: *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.* (1 Cor 5:4-5)

Celebrate the sacraments: When Paul gives instructions to the Corinthians about communion, he commands them to do it “when [they] come together as a church” (1 Cor. 11:17, 18, 20, 33, 34), saying, “*For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.*” (1 Cor. 11:26)

14. A church is subject to the authority of pastors who will give an account to God for the specific individuals entrusted to their care.

Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. (Acts 20:28)

So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. (1 Peter 5:1-4)

Conclusion

For these reasons, among others, we should seek to obey the command in Hebrews 10:24-25 to gather together: “Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, 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.”

In the context of the entire book, the author of Hebrews is doing much more than encouraging us to enjoy our relationships with other believers. Rather, the author of Hebrews is encouraging us to take advantage of the privilege we have together to draw near to “the house of God” (Heb. 10:21) with full assurance of faith.