“Together for the Gospel”

Hebrews 10:19–31

Randy D. Starkey
Hebrews 10:19–31

“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,

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.

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And 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.

For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.

Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace?
For we know him who said,
   “Vengeance is mine; I will repay.”
And again,
   “The Lord will judge his people.

“It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”
Introduction

This morning we are continuing in our series on our Church Covenant. We first considered the sufficiency of God’s Word and last week, the pursuit of Christ as the greatest pursuit and highest treasure. This week we turn our attention toward the statements that consider the role of the membership in the context of the church.

Follow with me as we read this portion of the covenant:

*Having experienced the new birth through the work of the Holy Spirit, repented of our sin, and embraced the marvelous gospel of Jesus Christ;*
*By God’s grace and for His glory;*
*In order to make Christ known as the greatest pursuit and highest treasure;*
*We covenant together . . .*
*. . . to encourage one another in the Word and by the Word that we might increasingly walk in a manner worthy of the Lord,*
*. . . to faithfully gather with the body for the purpose of worship, edification, and accountability,*

There are numerous opinions about the necessity and/or benefits of being a part of a church.

Some people think that church is a good thing in theory but never seem to find the time to follow through.

Some people choose to be casually connected to a church. They come and go on occasion and are known by some but not many. They may show up for several weeks and then be absent for weeks or months before their next appearance.

Some people believe going to church is extremely important and they show up every time the doors are open. These people are fairly well known by most because they are involved in so many activities. Typically these people are your typical outgoing extraverts who are liked by almost everyone. The fellowship of others is a critical part of their lives.

And still others, yearn for the company of fellow believers to encourage, and strive with them to live out the message of the gospel. These people gather with the church in order to be encouraged, edified, and held
accountable to the faith they so joyously profess and to do the same for others around them.

If we were to poll church attenders with the question, “why do you go to church?” I am certain we would get a generous variety of answers.

Some of them would sound something like:

“I enjoy the fellowship.” “I like the music.” “I need it like a shot in the arm to get through the week.” “It always seems to make me feel better.” “To worship God.” “I was raised to attend church.” “It keeps me grounded and inspired.” “For spiritual growth and guidance.”

Why do you seek to gather with the church? What are your expectations? Does your reason(s) flow from a biblical understanding of who the church is and what her purpose is or do they largely stem from personal issues and choices?
I want to share an illustration from another preacher whom I am often encouraged by. I have taken this illustration almost verbatim from one of his sermons. The preacher is Thabiti Anyabwile, pastor of First Baptist Church, Grand Cayman.

Listen to this story about three individuals as told by Thabiti:

“The First person is a young woman named Ronnie. She was invited to a Christmas concert by her fellow teacher, Troy. She had been an atheist from the age of 14. She believed a number of things patently contrary to the Christian faith and wasn’t sure Christianity was anything more than a feel good delusion. At the concert she recognized something about everyone singing, especially Troy. He sang with such joy on his face and the congregation sang liked they believed what they were singing. She began to ask questions. She wanted to know more. She began to attend church regularly including some fellowship events till eventually she began to unload her questions on the pastor. Not because she really wanted answers at first but because God was opening her heart to the truth through the witness of this church.

Then there’s Stephanie. Stephanie was a medical student who began attending services at the same church. Her family was Hindu by background. At first she attended with fellow classmates maybe a little out of curiosity. But she found herself continuing to come and learn. Several months later she attended a Lord’s Supper service in the evening. And when the table was fenced (meaning that only those who were believers walking in repentance were allowed to partake), she recognized that she was a sinner outside the people of God with no share in Christ. And in that solemn moment as the rest of the congregation partook of the Lord’s body and blood, she repented and believed.

Shawn attended church only sporadically. His mother was a long term member and when he attended it was usually to please his mom.
But recently things had been a little bit different. He had began to attend all by himself, in fact; he began to attend a different church. And on this Sunday morning baptism testimonies were shared and new Christians were (going to be) baptized. He followed along intently and even went with the congregation over to the beach where the baptisms were held. As he watched, he felt moved, compelled really; to confess his sins and to be baptized. In his Sunday best, not waiting for an invitation from the pastor, he walked into the ocean and joined the others and professed his faith in Christ and was baptized.”

“In each case there is something about the gathering of the congregation that made the gospel effective in each of their lives. They were hearing the message in a different way. Not because the preacher was particularly clever or had a unique way of saying things, but because the congregation, the entire community, the assembly of God’s people were giving testimony to the truth and the saving power of Jesus Christ.”

(Quotation from Thabiti Anyabwile’s sermon on 1 Corinthians 14 @ 9Marks Conference 2013 at Southeastern Theological Seminary)
The testimony of these individuals serves as an example of the purpose and power of the assembled church for whom Christ died to establish for this very purpose. In a very real way, God purposed that the corporate testimony of the gathered people of God would serve as the vehicle by which God would save lost sinners. This doesn’t mean that as individuals we are exempt from declaring the gospel message ourselves, only that the means by which God designed to win the lost does not terminate in individualism but rather in the corporate body we call the local church. Stated another way, our greatest ability to impact this world with the gospel does not rest in the skill and abilities of winsome individuals but in the purpose and power of the corporate body, the community of faith who have covenanted together for this very purpose; broadcasting a singular, unified testimony of God’s glory and goodness to the community around them and to the ends of the earth.

Last week, Jarrod used the analogy of pointillism to illustrate the individual points that make up the broader message. Let me use that same analogy to illustrate how the gospel is most effectively proclaimed. While every dot in pointillism art is significant and must accurately serve its individual role, it is the collective work of all the individual dots that communicate the message through art. Like pointillism art, individual Christians are significant in themselves but the clearest communication of the message of the gospel is served when each individual Christian accurately serves his/her role within the collective community of faith. When this occurs, the testimony of the gospel communicated through the corporate body becomes most evident and most clear!

It is for this reason that Christians are called to participate together with other believers in a way that allows us to communicate a singular, unified testimony of God’s glory and grace. The Bible teaches us that this particular way is in and through the gathered body called the church which is individual believers committing themselves to the effective testimony of the whole over and above their own individual interests.
Context

While the ultimate goal of the church is to present a unified testimony of God's glory and grace; our text today does not explicitly present that as the reason for the community of faith. This point, however, is implicit in the overall context of the Scripture of which Hebrews 10 is a part of.

The author of Hebrews spends the first 9 1/2 chapters arguing for the supremacy of Christ over all things. He is greater than the angels, He is greater than the Old Covenant sacrifices, He is greater than the Old Testament high priests, and the covenant which He inaugurates is greater than the covenant inaugurated by Moses. In Hebrews 10:19 and following, the author of Hebrews seeks to present the resulting condition for believers because Christ is greater than all.

Verses 19–21 state the present reality accomplished by Christ.

1. “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 . . .

2. “Since we have a great priest over the house of God.”

In light of these accomplishments, believers should respond by living as though these things are true. The reality of Christ’s work should be and will be an evident reality in the way that those of us who say we believe live our lives in word and deed.

The following 3 exhortations in verses 22–25, are not only the logical response to the supremacy of Christ, but also serve to protect believers in this world. Beginning in verse 26, the author states the reason why the preceding exhortations are so important.

Verse 26 begins, “For if we go on sinning deliberately . . .” The “for” indicates what follows is an explanation for what preceded it. This explanation could be taken in one of three ways.

1. If believers are not doing what the previous exhortations state, then by
omission, they are sinning deliberately, or

2. The previous exhortations are the very things that will prevent believers from sinning deliberately.

3. Both the omission of these exhortations in the believers life is deliberate sin and will possibly result in professing believers living in other deliberate sinful lifestyles.

Verses 26–31 go on to serve as a warning for those who go on sinning deliberately. There is a fearful expectation of judgment and a fury of fire that consumes. Finally the writer states, “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”

However you understand these verses, there is no way to get around the serious nature concerning those who do go on sinning deliberately!

In light of this severe warning, we are compelled to give attention to the exhortations presented in verses 22–25. While all three exhortations play a significant role in the preservation of believers, we will only be focusing on the third this morning.

Verses 22–25 present the following exhortations:

1. Living in Repentance - “Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience”

2. Living without Compromise - “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering”

3. Living in Community - “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.”

The final exhortation serves as the situation and sphere that supports the first two. The listing of this exhortation in the last place along with its length in comparison to the other two, seeks to highlight its importance. While living in repentance and without compromise are no less significant, they will
not likely be realities in the lives of those who ignore this final exhortation in verses 24–25. Therefore, if it is our desire to avoid the consequences of the warning in verses 26–31, we would be wise to give this exhortation, along with the others; serious consideration.

It is this exhortation from which I have drawn the title of our message, “Together for the Gospel.” It is the intention of the author of Hebrews, as well as mine, to impress upon each of us the necessity of believers to live out the Christian life together in community. To not do so will make us susceptible to the subsequent warning as well as make it impossible for us to exhibit a unified testimony of God’s glory and grace in any real tangible way.
Stir Up One Another

The author writes, “Let us consider how to stir up one another . . .” Some translations use the word “provoke” which is probably a better translation. The idea here is not merely to encourage, that comes later. But rather to specifically and directly exhort each other to live in accordance with the Scripture which is the meaning of “to love and good works.” This doesn’t simply mean that we are to encourage each other to be nice and do good things. The context of this phrase has the gospel in view. Sure love involves having a kind spirit and a good attitude, but biblical love also involves correction and willingness to confront error for the good of everyone. This includes confronting fellow believers within our community of faith when we become aware of unrepented sin if their lives. Many consider this to be judgmental, but the Bible portrays it as an act of love. No one lets their loved one live foolishly and dangerously without saying anything simply because they don’t want to hurt their feelings. That’s like letting your child play in middle of I-10 and not saying anything because they might get upset. Be careful not to understand this idea in light of modern politically correct definitions. We help each other avoid the impending danger revealed in verses 26–31 by holding each other accountable to the faith we profess.

While good works includes the everyday simple things that we can and should do for the good of others, it more specifically has in view the good works that God has prepared for those whom He has redeemed. Good works in the New Testament typically mean works that communicate evidently the message of the gospel. There are numerous organizations that do good works in this world who do not believe the gospel. Lost people can do good things and many do, but the author of Hebrews along with the whole of Scripture seeks to emphasize works that proclaim the good news of the gospel leading people to recognize their sinfulness and need for a Savior.
Therefore, one of the purposes for which the people of God are to meet together is to provoke each other to love and good works that point sinners to the cross. We are so easily distracted from the most important thing because of the world around us and our own worldliness. We often find ourselves pouring more time and energy into so many other things and very little time and effort into the gospel. We need each other to help us keep the main thing the main thing. There are plenty of other venues for entertainment and all the other things we so often get distracted with. When we come together, which is not that often, we must make the most of the time we have to exhort, provoke, or stir up each other for the purpose of proclaiming and living the gospel for the glory of God.
Encouraging One Another

Not only are we to stir up or provoke each other to love and good works, but we are to encourage each other. What exactly does that mean? In what way are we to encourage each other.

There are a variety of things for which we desire and need to be encouraged and the Bible speaks on many of them. In light of the context here, however, there is likely a specific meaning of this idea of encouraging. This passage isn’t speaking about encouraging each other about our jobs or the difficulty we may be facing at home, or the concerning our low self-esteem. This particular phrase points back to the previous one, “not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another.” The meaning here is directly related to the neglect of meeting together. We are responsible to encourage one another to continue meeting together, especially since there are many who are neglecting it.

We all know people to used to meet together with the church but have now dropped out. We all know people who come from time to time and do not see the significance in being a faithful participant in the body. If that doesn’t concern you, read the following verses again! We shouldn’t be okay with it. We should be doing everything we can to engage those people and exhort them to return. This doesn’t mean that we have to be harsh or condescending about it, but honestly don’t see that as our problem. Our problem in the world today is that we tend to make people feel okay about their lack of faithfulness. We need to take absence from the community of faith more seriously because the Word of God does. It is not enough to say, “at least they made a commitment to Christ” and leave their neglect of the church alone.

You don’t honestly know that a person is truly saved or not. We only have confidence in one’s salvation based upon the life that they live. It is difficult to have confidence in those who have no desire to meet with God’s people in order to worship, be edified in the Word, and corporately strive
together for the gospel.

And even if we have confidence in those who neglect the church, the Scripture poses a serious danger for those who do. It is more likely that those who neglect the church will find themselves struggling in sin. And God’s Word says,

“if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.

Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace?

For we know him who said, 

“Vengeance is mine; I will repay.”

And again,

“The Lord will judge his people.

“It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”
Conclusion

We have the privilege and freedom to openly meet together as God’s Word encourages and commands us to do, yet we take it for granted. It is difficult for us to know what it would be like to be threatened by our meeting together and have to do it in secret, yet many believers around the world do so everyday. What we often consider common or even mundane, many believers in other countries put their lives at risk to do. The reality is that we give ourselves to what we value. If we value the Word of God and the church for which Christ died to establish, then we will give ourselves to the endeavor to meet together to provoke one another to love and good works and we would passionately encourage all who profess the name of Christ to do the same.

It our desire and express aim to grow a church that would covenant together with all our hearts and at all costs . . .
. . . to encourage one another in the Word and by the Word that we might increasingly walk in a manner worthy of the Lord,
. . . to faithfully gather with the body for the purpose of worship, edification, and accountability,