

The Embodied Savior and The Embodied Church

Hebrews 10:19-25

“The physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer . . . It is easily forgotten that the fellowship of the Christian brother is a gift of grace.”¹

Technology is a double-edged sword. For every advance in technology that makes life faster, easier, better, or more convenient, we—as a people, as a culture—lose something of value. Anyone who’s read *Frankenstein* knows just because you CAN do something doesn’t mean you SHOULD. I recently saw a video that was a perfect metaphor for the church in the 21st century. It was a robot herding sheep in New Zealand. Some say it is the future of agriculture. But one experienced shepherd has insightfully critiqued this technological advancement: *“No one who works with sheep needs this or wants this—it is a fantasy. The relationship between sheep and [shepherd]—the dynamic of two intelligent beings—is vital. The most productive and sustainable [agriculture] on earth is labor intensive—more people, more contact. The relentless drive to de-skill, mechanize and simplify farm work to take people out of the fields is the exact opposite of what our society needs.”²*

Some say that technology is the future of the church. Yet based on our text this morning—which warns against “neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some”—we would have to agree with this shepherd’s critique regarding the church and technology. Virtual church is a fantasy and the exact opposite of what we need. With every advancement of technology in the church, we gain an illusion of connection, but deep, embodied, and engaged community is lost. In the 21st century, it is common to hear phrases like: “I go to church online;” “I am a Christian, but I don’t go to church;” “I am spiritual, but not religious.” These statements would have been very confusing thirty years ago. How did we get here? There have been some significant philosophical shifts and technological developments have led us to this point where online church is normalized.

The Unchurched Church. There was the rise of the seeker-friendly/seeker-sensitive movement. Rather than worshipping God and maturing believers, churches became social clubs that catered to unbelievers—“churches for the unchurched”. Rather than being missional, they became attractional. The significant shift was that **church became a product to be marketed** to the unchurched consumer rather than a people to join.

The Antichurch Church. Then there was the rise of the emergent church. This was more of a postmodern deconstruction of the church, traditional Christianity, and core doctrines of our faith. The significant shift was that **church became reinvented and uninstitutionalized**. People became disenchanting, disgruntled, disembodied, and then disengaged from their local churches.

The Ungathered Church. With the rise of technology, first you had recorded Sunday sermons available on radio and cassette tape. With the TV came televangelists like Charles Stanley and Pat Robertson and now Joel Osteen. Then with the rise of the internet you had podcasts, sermon central, and now church on livestream on church websites but now through social media platforms. The significant shift here was that **church became a production to be viewed in isolation or in isolation from the assembly**. If you can control your pastor with a remote . . .

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: HarperCollins, 1954), 19-20.

² James Rebanks in “A Robot Sheepdog?” by James Vincent, on theverge.com, 5/22/2020.

The Unshepherded Church. Also with the rise of technology, there came this rethinking of church planting. Rather than planting another independent church with its own leadership and pastor, there was a move toward multi-site or satellite churches. Churches were planted in a different city or state where they would simply pump in the service from the main church through a live video feed. The significant shift here is the **church became gathered yet shepherdless**.

All of this came to a head in 2020. Due to unprecedented circumstances, virtual church became normalized as we were all quarantined in our homes. This kind of “church” became necessary for a time, and while there are still valid reasons to provide an online platform and to stay at home, **it falls short of God’s design and expectations for his church**. Separated from the assembly, you can’t practice the one-anothers and the leadership can’t joyfully keep an account of you. Some pastors are saying online church is the future. Carey Nieuwhof recently tweeted, “In 2021, if coming to Christ means coming to your church in a set location and a set time, you need a new strategy.” Others, like Allister Begg, are calling for end to livestream because it may “unintentionally detract from local church attendance, membership, and involvement.”³ **We want to look forward together to church in a post-pandemic world and what the timeless truths of Scripture teach about church**. Sushi, by definition, is raw fish. Church, by definition, is an assembly that gathers together regularly. If, hypothetically, you were to order a baked option at a sushi restaurant, all of your friends will make fun of you and tell you that you still haven’t tried sushi. In the same way, a nongathered church for nonChristians led by nonpastors is a nonchurch.

Hebrews is a lengthy sermon where the preacher makes the case for the superiority of Jesus Christ. He is the fulfillment of the Old Testament and he has initiated a new covenant. The author was warning people about the dangers of falling away from the body of Christ and forsaking the New Covenant. He was writing to Jews who were now faced with the challenge of worshipping alongside Gentiles. In his call for them to see the value of gathering together for worship, he argues for an embodied church because of our embodied Savior.

Our Unthreatened Liberty in an Embodied Savior

“Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places . . .”

We live in an age when our liberties and freedoms are fragile. They were already waxing and waning, but now, especially after the events of this past year, they are more jeopardized and vulnerable than ever before. As Christians, this should not concern us as much as others because we don’t place our ultimate hope in our earthly liberties, our earthly country, or uninspired, man-made documents. We are sojourners passing through and we have **a greater liberty that forever remains unthreatened**. The word for “confidence” more literally refers to the *liberty* or *freedom* Christians have to boldly approach a holy God—to go where angels fear to tread. Isaiah saw a vision of God’s holiness on his throne where the seraphim covered their faces and their feet with their wings because God’s holiness was so majestic. They cried out “Holy, holy, holy.” But because God became flesh, in Jesus Christ we have the freedom to approach him together in worship. The author explains Jesus’ embodied ministry in three ways—

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<https://www.parksidechurch.com/learn/building-next-generation/news/2021/01/15/sunday-morning-livestream-update/>

By A New and Living Way (v. 20)

“ . . . by a new and living way that he opened for us . . . ”

First, we have this unthreatened liberty through a new and living way that Jesus has opened for us. The word “way” is directly connected to the earlier word “enter.” It has the idea of access. We can boldly enter the holy places through Christ, the exclusive way. Access was not something we could earn or achieve. In fact we were banished from God’s presence because of our sinfulness. The word “new” is a unique word only used once in all of the Scripture here in our passage. It does not simply convey the idea of novelty as in a brand new car. It means “recently slaughtered” or “freshly killed”—clearly a reference to the atoning sacrifice of Christ in our place. And “living” is a clear reference to the resurrection. So, through the sin-bearing sacrifice and resurrection of Christ, we now have “a way of salvation (Acts 16:17). The NASB reads “inaugurated”—the formal commencement of something new. At the Last Supper on the night of his betrayal, Jesus inaugurated the New Covenant in his blood.

By Flesh and Blood (v. 19, 20)

“ . . . by the blood of Jesus . . . through the curtain, that is, his flesh . . . ”

Secondly, we have this bold access to God without fear of being damned because of the flesh and blood of Jesus. In the Temple there was a giant curtain that separated the holy place from the ordinary people. Only the high priest could enter there. At the moment of Jesus’ death, this curtain was rent in half from top to bottom signifying new freedom of access to God for all who place their faith and trust in him. Jesus is the Way (Jn. 14:6). The author makes it clear in the earlier verses that Jesus had a human body. “A body You have prepared for Me” (v. 5). “We have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (v. 10). Jesus achieved this by his flesh and blood. Have you ever considered that the death and resurrection of Christ would not have been possible without a body? A virtual or hologram savior could not suffer on a cross. The author shows us that Jesus flesh is like the curtain because it was also torn and his blood was spilled to give us this unthreatened liberty of access.

By Our Great High Priest (v. 21)

“ . . . and since we have a great priest over the house of God.”

Thirdly, the writer connects our unthreatened liberty to the high priestly ministry of Christ. Christ is now the great high priest that presides over the house of God, the Church. As our priest, he serves as a mediator between God and man representing both and making a relationship possible. The Old Testament priests did this by offering sacrifices again and again; Jesus did this by becoming a man and offering himself as a sacrifice once for all. Now he sits at the right hand of the Father as our priest, our advocate, and intercessor. Because he was an embodied human we know we have a compassionate high priest in Christ who understands our weakness (Heb. 4:16). Therefore we can draw near to the Father’s throne in confidence knowing we will receive mercy and grace.

“ . . . not neglecting to meet together as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another as you see the Day drawing near ” (v. 25).

We cannot miss the connection between the beginning of this section and the end. The author connects the incarnation of Christ to the church gathered in person. Without the body of Christ our Savior there would be no Body of Christ, the church. One commentator makes this connection: “The neglect of worship and fellowship was symptomatic of a catastrophic failure to appreciate the significance of

Christ's priestly ministry and the access to God it provided."⁴ The author connects our gathering in person to the theology of the incarnation. The basis for gathering together is deeper than just tradition, it is rooted in something much more significant. An ungathered church is as useless as a bodiless savior. Because we have an embodied Savior, we assemble as an embodied church.

The Incomparable Joys of an Embodied Church

Notice that the 3 main verbs are all 1st person plural—"let *us* draw near, let *us* hold fast, let *us* consider." Based on an embodied, incarnated Savior, **the writer is now exhorting us to assemble together in active participation.** In a time when quarantine, social distancing, and isolation are normalized, there is an unprecedented rise in virtual "church." This will always leave us feeling disillusioned, shortchanged, and unsatisfied because it falls short of God's design for his church. **We were not designed for wireless connection but deep, situated, corporate, and incarnated community.** Virtual "church" should not be normalized. It is a fantasy—the exact opposite of what a Christian needs. This is mainly because it is isolated and passive. We miss out on the incomparable joys of meeting together and the participation and involvement our organic life. The church's mission is not to sell a product, provide a service, or produce a program. Our mission is to disciple people. "Virtual discipleship cannot create deep disciples. Deep discipleship is intensely local. Formation is meant to be personal, embodied, and incarnational."⁵ Is church messy? Yes. Is church hard? Absolutely. So is iron sharpening iron. But being together provides the kind of involvement that is essential to our worship and mission. We are to be assembled, embodied, and engaged. It is a gift of grace. The author lists three incomparable joys of gathering—

Reveling Together in Our Shared Faith (v. 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."

Holistic Deliverance. Our deliverance is holistic; it is inward and outward. We are delivered from sin and guilt and death. We fear no condemnation. "He has saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, *by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit*" (Titus 3:5). "Because Jesus lives forever, He has a permanent priesthood. Therefore He is *able to save to the uttermost* those who draw near to God through him" (Heb. 7:25). These are New Covenant realities we revel in together when we assemble.

Countercultural Unity. We live in a fractured world where rioting, protesting, canceling, and censoring those we disagree with is normal. Oftentimes this is all done in the name of unity. When we gather together as a church, we worship and revel in solidarity because of our union with Christ. We (plural) draw near to God with a true heart (singular). "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, for this you were called as *members of one body*. And be thankful" (Col. 3:15). We are not united in shallow, temporary things. We are united in something stronger than blood, something more profound than identity politics, something more robust than any ideology—we are united in our faith. When we gather, we draw near to our Savior with our hearts united in full assurance of faith. We rally together and wave the blood-stained banner of the cross.

⁴ William Lane, *Hebrews 9-13* (Nashville: Nelson, 1991), 290.

⁵ J. T. English, *Deep Discipleship* (Nashville, B&H, 2020), 55.

Persevering Together in Our Shared Hope (v. 23)

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

An Unwavering Hope. This past year and this past week, we’ve seen where the world’s hopes lie. We’ve seen people’s hopes let them down. As the church we have a certain hope. Our hope is not dependent on circumstances—the ups and downs, the backs and forths, the lefts and rights. When we gather together, we confess the robust hope that we share. “Christ is faithful over God’s house as a son. And we are his house, if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope” (Heb. 3:1). Our hope is reinforced when we confess it together and to one another.

An Unfailing Savior. We have a faithful, promise-keeping Savior. Our hope is fixed to his promises to us. “Let the Word of Christ richly dwell in you as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, with gratitude in your hearts to God” (Col. 3:16). When we gather together and read the Scripture, call upon the Lord in prayer, sing spiritual truths, break bread, baptize in the water, sit under the instruction of the Word, we are confessing our hope to one another. Look around, together we are holding fast and clinging our Savior as our greatest treasure. We are united in hope. “We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf” (Heb. 6:19-20a).

Growing Together in Our Shared Love (v. 24)

“And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works . . .”

Christ-centered Affection. We gather together with a true heart. Genuine and sincere affection for one another flows from the love we’ve received from Christ. The word here literally means “incite.” We generally hear this word in a negative context. In the psychology of riots, there is a theory of “the bad leading the mad.” It is easy to manipulate a large disgruntled crowd that is gullible and volatile. Like a powder keg, it only takes one spark to explode. In our context, it is similar but the opposite—the loved leading the loved. Our gathering together is equally explosive, but with the potential for love not violence. We gather to excite, inflame, and provoke one another to greater depths of love—for God and one another. Our love is contagious. “Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart” (1 Pet. 1:22)

Self-sacrificial Action. Nothing pleases me more as a father than to see my children getting along and sacrificing for one another without being asked or forced. The other day as my son was in tears because he didn’t get to have one of those Uploaded Lunchables for lunch. My daughter Nina saw his hurt and whispered to my wife, “Hey Mom, he can have mine.” It was a moving, Christ-like gesture. The early church sacrificed for one another. In Acts 2, we read that they were selling their possessions and belongings and giving to those in need. There is a hurt in every heart and in every home. When we gather we intentionally stir ourselves up to greater depths of affection and sacrifice. Dane Ortlund writes, “How do we care for a wounded body part? We nurse it, bandage it, protect it, and give it time to heal. For that body part isn’t just a close friend, it is part of us.”⁶

We gather together united in faith, hope, and love. We have what the world longs for and can’t find or manufacture. And we cannot replicate or manufacture this organic life on any virtual platform.

⁶ Dane Ortlund, *Gentle and Lowly* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020), 41.

There once was a man who was stranded on a deserted island by himself (think Tom Hanks in *Castaway*). For many years he survived by living off the land and holding on to the hope that he would one day be rescued. When he was finally discovered and rescued, the crew noticed some makeshift structure on the beach. When they asked him what they were, he replied, “That one is my home and that one is my church.” Confused, they asked what the third structure was and the man replied, “Oh, that’s where I used to go to church.” This story speaks for itself but illustrates some key truths: church is messy, I want church on my own terms, it’s easy to switch churches, and the problem with church is usually me!

Wish dream. Bonhoeffer warns, “Every human wish dream that is injected into the Christian community is a hindrance to genuine community and must be banished if genuine community is to survive. He who loves his dream of a community more than the Christian community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter, even though his personal intentions may be ever so honest and earnest and sacrificial.”⁷ We all have a wish dream—a personal preference of how church *should* be. I wish there were more people who look like me. I wish there were more people my age. I wish there were more single people. I wish would meet in our building. I wish we sang more hymns. I wish. I wish. I wish. Despite all the personal inconveniences, discomforts, disappointments, frustrations, elements, we must prioritize and safeguard our embodied assembly. The incomparable benefits of gathering together far outweigh our myopic, self-centered desires—selfish ambitions which are neither Christ-centered nor others-centered. There is a sense of urgency at the end of the passage—as you see the day drawing near. Christ is on the move!

Spurgeon once warned that “Satan always hates Christian fellowship; it is his policy to keep Christians apart. Anything which can divide saints from one another he delights in. He attaches more importance to godly [fellowship] than we do.”⁸

Jay Kim writes, “Some things—the most transformative things—demand our whole-bodied presence . . . When it comes to the truly important stuff of life, there’s no substitute for showing up.”⁹ God’s greatest gift to us was his only Son in human flesh. Our greatest gift to one another is our physical presence. We gather to together regularly worship, yes, and to be fully known and fully loved. Let’s be thankful for the body of Christ; there is no salvation without it. And let’s be thankful for the gathering of believers; there would be no church without it.

⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: HarperCollins, 1954), 27.

⁸ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, “Satanic Hindrances,” *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* Vol. 11, preached 10/29/1865.

⁹ Jay Y. Kim, *Analog Church* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2020), 69, 102.