

The Importance of In-Person Gathering of the Church

Dr. Alexander Kurian

(I had the opportunity to answer questions, discuss, counsel and teach on the topic discussed in this brief article with many who are concerned and burdened about this matter. These pastoral interactions were really edifying and enlightening).

The covid pandemic created a unique time in the history of the church. The lockdown and social distancing mandates forced us to cancel our regular church gatherings. The only other option was to meet through zoom or other web platforms. I praise God that the technology was very helpful during those challenging times. I am also blessed and encouraged by the bold testimony of churches which didn't close and considered church "essential" at all times. Thank God, those days are over and by the grace and sovereign will of God, we are living happily in a post-covid world (to a great extent) and we are able to gather-together in our local assemblies.

The gathering of the church has always been "**in-person.**" It is indeed a sad situation that now we have to come up with a qualifying phrase "in- person church" to describe our gatherings, because some assembly gatherings are not in person anymore. During these post covid times, we have created a new ecclesiology of **hybrid gatherings** and even many church leaders are encouraging it through their policies, attitudes and actions (may be not to offend people, or to be politically correct, or it can be even due to lack of Scriptural understanding about the importance of the gathered church). They have failed to Scripturally address this issue and take appropriate steps to help the church to get out of this trap. It seems to me that Satan has exploited the covid situation to promote an unscriptural mentality that church gatherings are optional for Christians, and it is not at all important to be physically present in the meetings of the church.

Is church gatherings optional for Christians? The question is profoundly relevant, especially in our day of endless on-line options. The Bible's answer is unmistakably clear: **NO**. Gathered worship, prayer, fellowship, edification, study of God's Word is **NOT** optional. It is a divine requirement for every member of the body of Christ. Christian life is always church centered. **It is high time that we prioritize physical gatherings in assembly meetings.** Certainly, there are times and situations when one cannot attend church meetings (illness, work, emergencies, or other practically difficult situations beyond one's control). Thank God the Lord has made provisions for them through the help of technology to attend meetings (these situations are exceptions). Let us not trivialize this Scriptural truth and make it easier for people to watch church from home, thus neglecting the divine imperative of meeting together.

The Importance of the Concept of *Ekklesia*

We are the *Ekklesia* of God. Church is the called-out company of believers, gathered unto the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and spiritually united to Christ, the head of the church. It is the

fellowship of believers who meet regularly in local assemblies to exalt God, edify the body of Christ, to equip the saints and to evangelize the lost. It is a divine assembly gathered to fulfill divine mandates. We are not called to tune into some device and attend church in absentia. Our call to gather as the body of Christ goes deeper than our convenience and comfort. Church's physical gathering is a glad and visible expression of believers as the called-out people of God. Along these lines, please note that Paul's instructions to Timothy and Titus, and numerous other instructions and exhortations in the Epistles, are relevant only in the context of in-person corporate gathering of the church. Neglect of corporate gathering minimizes the importance of the divine mandate regarding assembly meetings.

Church is the workshop of the Holy Spirit. Christian life in the New Testament is always and essentially church centered. We are not called for privatized spirituality (a terrible pandemic in evangelical culture today). The celebration of the ordinances, the preaching of the Word, prayer, exhortation, edification, and fellowship are the divinely instituted means for our daily sanctification and spiritual growth. We take pride in the four pillars of the church – apostle's teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, and prayer (Acts 2:42). But we ignore the first part of the verse which states that **"they were continually devoting themselves"** to these spiritual duties; **all four of them, not just the breaking of bread.** The words "continued," "together," and "one accord" (Acts 2:42-46) describe a divine template for God's people – gathering regularly and living purposefully in fellowship with the people of God. When the church was born on the Day of Pentecost, its unity of Spirit and purpose were tangibly expressed through public gatherings. This was the divine design for the church, then and now.

Usually, the elders notice people who don't regularly attend Sunday meetings and ask them the reason why they were not present. But even if they miss hundreds of prayer meetings, nobody is bothered. It is in the gathered worship and activities of the assembly - and not separate from it - that God's people receive the blessings He has promised for His church. Let us not presume upon God's goodness and question His divine wisdom.

God's people are to be active members of the body of Christ (1 Cor.12:12-26; Rom.12:3-8). The church of the living God is the household (family) of God, the pillar and support of the truth (1 Tim 3:15). The church is to give visible expression to these truths corporately every time when we gather. Let us not envision Christianity through privatized and individualistic spirituality. The growing trend to attend meetings according to personal convenience and comfort through online means is utterly foreign to Biblical Christianity. This autonomous trend will spiritually weaken us. Providing local assembly meetings on Zoom or on-line platforms will breed spiritual autonomy and weaken believers in faith. Leaders have a great responsibility in this matter as they are charged to keep watch over the souls under their care (Heb.13:17). Throughout His Word, God Himself declares His church's physical gatherings to be essential. That is the only way He has designed the functioning of His church. Let us not try to tamper with it, misrepresent it, depreciate it, or try to alter it according to our convenience and cleverness.

“Not Forsaking Our Own Assembling Together” (Heb.10:25).

Let us not forget that this command was written to God’s people who faced consequences for gathering corporately. Identifying with Christ and His church was costly to them (Heb.10:32-35). **Nevertheless, they were not to forsake the assembly.** In spite of their adverse circumstances, God commanded them to meet together to worship, to fellowship and to encourage one another - to draw near, to confess (speak out), and to stir up (10:22-25). These were the divinely instituted means for their spiritual survival and security. They had to prioritize gathering. In view of a potential danger or health risk, we were afraid to gather. But that is no comparison with the situation of the Hebrew Christians who “endured a great conflict of sufferings, by being made a public spectacle through reproaches and tribulations” (Heb.10:32-33).

The Greek verb *Sunago* (“to gather together” or “assemble together”) refers to the meeting of believers in the early church. The verb is used several times in Acts for the gathering of the disciples (Acts 4:31; 11:26; 14:27; 15:6, 30; 20:7, 8). Heb.10:25 uses an intensive form *episunagoge* for the regular gathering together of Christians. Consider all the “one-another” statements in the Bible. The means God has designed His purpose for the church is by the regular, meaningful gathering of the church corporately. Our excuses will not stand the test of divine scrutiny in this matter.

Conclusion

We are not neglecting nor forsaking the assembling of God’s people if we had to temporarily cancel our meetings due to health risk or a legitimate government order. But we are neglecting and forsaking our assembling together if we fail to prioritize gathering as a regular way of life. It is an indication of bad theology and practice. Our selfishness, comfort and convenience should not define this issue, because the gatherings of the church are God-ordained and commanded in the Word. The means God has designed to achieve His purpose for the church is the regular, meaningful gathering of the church corporately. **Church (gathered) is essential.** All believers and their spiritual shepherds should be convinced of this divine imperative and promote the in-person gathering of the church in relation to all meetings. Let our New Testament pattern go all the way through church life and practices. The gathered community of God’s people is the primary construction site for building Christlikeness and fulfilling God’s plan for the church.

Let me close with the statement of a servant of God who was very much concerned and burdened about this issue. “To Christians who sincerely wonder whether “virtual church” has now proven itself a preferred new normal, the Scripture makes this clear: **It’s virtually impossible.**”