

“Christian Community Emerges Out of the Gospel”—Hebrews 10:23-25

Brandon Holiski
Southern Oaks Baptist Church
April 29, 2018

[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, www.welovethegospel.com]

Take your Bible and meet me in Hebrews 10...

We are starting a mini-series today or, perhaps better, a series within our series. This short series will center on one central theme, which we will get to in a minute, and as such will require that we trace certain ideas through multiple texts of Scripture. This is not our usual approach to a sermon series or even individual sermons.

If you have been here for any length of time then you likely know about my convictions on expository preaching. The preacher’s job is not to create meaning, but to explain the meaning that is already built into the text by the author. You need to know what God reveals in His Word, not what some preacher thinks about life. What the author intended to communicate should be what the sermon is about. Therefore, we take time to wrestle with things like background, words, grammar, syntax, and context because they help us grasp authorial intent. What the text means to you is subjective and doesn’t really matter. What we are after is what the author, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, was trying to communicate. That’s where the meaning is found and that’s the soil out of which faithful application springs forth.

So the best way to get at that, it seems to me, is by regular and systematic sermons that work through books of the Bible, verse-by-verse, line by line, without skipping the hard stuff. One of the dangers with a more topical approach is that it is often prone to skip over sections of God’s Word and difficult passages of the Bible. The end result is that the people of God don’t get the full counsel of God. This is not intentional, but it’s all but inescapable. I don’t trust myself enough to be a topical preacher. I know that, if left to my own devices, I will gravitate towards certain topics and not others.

To guard against that tendency, preaching expositionally is my go-to approach. “In short, expository preaching is *Word-centered*, *Word-driven*, or *Word-saturated* preaching. It involves explaining what God has said in his Word, declaring what God has done in his Son, and applying this message to the hearts of people.”¹ This is the best way to cultivate healthy disciples and thus it’s my conviction that expository preaching should be the main diet of sermons that God’s people hear in every church.

That said, I do agree with Tony Merida, professor of preaching at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, who also shares these convictions on preaching, but adds this qualification in one of his books on preaching: “I like to say that moving systematically through books is the diet of our congregation, but occasionally we go out to eat (preaching a *topositional* sermon or a thematic series).”² I love that term, “topositional.” I wouldn’t describe myself as a topical preacher, but every so often I will preach on a topic expositionally (i.e., a “topositional sermon”). Today is one of those days.

The mini-series we are starting today is called “The Ch[ur]ch Gathered” and the theme verse for the series is found in Hebrews 10:23-25. Look there.

*“Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.
24 And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, 25 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.” (Hebrews 10:23-25)

This is essentially the same message that we have encountered in Hebrews 3. Last week, for instance, we considered these verses from the third chapter:

“Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. ¹³ But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.” (Hebrews 3:12-13)

We saw how the writer of Hebrews sees Christian community as essential for the believers walk with God. The body of believers, gathering together and wielding the Word of God, helps guard our hearts from unbelief and fan the flame of perseverance in our lives. And since, as the next verse teaches, we must *“hold our original confidence to the end,”* then Christian community is instrumental in guarding the individual for their final salvation. We need each other. God uses your brothers and sisters in the church to preserve and persevere your faith.

So it shouldn't surprise us then that the writer of Hebrews tells us to *“consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some...”* I said last week that we need to strive to be among the gathered not the “some” who neglect the gathering. This is God's will for all His people. And that is what this series will be about.

Interestingly, when we have a sermon like this or a short topical series like this (which has only happened twice in the last four years), it typically connects to our mission statement. This one is no different. In this series I want us to focus on how key Christian community is for our purpose and plan here at Southern Oaks. This begs the question, what is our purpose and plan here at Southern Oaks? Here's how we articulate them in two statements:

Our Purpose: “We Exist to Glorify God through Gospel-Transformed Lives...”

Our Plan: “We Do This by Actively Embracing Three GCs: Gospel-Centrality, the Great Commission, and the Great Commandments”

For a more detailed explanation of these things, I would encourage you to check out our “Three GCs” sermon series, which you can access on our website. What we are going to do in the first few sermons of this series is consider how Christian community relates to these GCs. So here's a glimpse at where we are heading:

- Sermon 1: Christian Community Emerges Out of the Gospel
- Sermon 2: Christian Community Advances the Great Commission
- Sermon 3: Christian Community Expresses the Great Commandments
- Sermon 4: Christian Community Is Not to Be Neglected
- Sermon 5: A Biblical Case for Church Membership

So today, we will take up that first idea—Christian community emerges out of the Gospel—which will serve as a good bridge to sharing the Lord's Supper together.

Let's start with a question. Can't I be a Christian without the church? Perhaps you have asked that question before. Perhaps you have known people who have refused to be a part of a local church and yet identify themselves as Christians. The bumper sticker, “I follow Jesus, but I don't do church,” captures the

sentiment. Maybe you have been such a person. As trendy as this individualism is in our day, there is a certain biblical ignorance that stands behind it.

In a book called, *Why Bother with Church?*, Sam Allberry writes,

“Throughout the Bible, we see that God’s plan is to make a people for himself. This is crucial. God’s purpose is not [merely] to have persons relating to him individually, but a people that, together, are his. God’s promise to Abraham was that he would be the father of ‘a great nation’ (Genesis 12 v 2). The vision of heaven that the apostle John is given right at the end of the Bible is of a ‘great multitude that no one could count’ worshipping God together (Revelation 7 v 9). God has always promised there would be a people for himself. This means that part of God’s work in drawing people to himself is drawing his people to one another. When he saves, he gathers. Individuals who come to Christ are assembled together with one another.”³

Indeed the word for “church” in the New Testament comes from the Greek word *ekklesia*, which is one word made up of two. The first word means “out of” one thing to another and the second meaning “to call.” Therefore, as Trevin Wax explains,

“The word ‘church’ doesn’t refer to a building...it means an assembly, a gathered community. One of the primary functions of a church is that we gather together. It goes to the very core of who we are as a people. We are a called-out people. God has called us out of the kingdom of darkness into His marvelous light.”⁴

Usually at this point, those trying to be objectionable will interject, “Yeah but we *are* the church and that’s true whether we happen to be at church or not.” On one level this is true. The Bible teaches us about what we call the “church universal,” which refers to all God’s people across the globe that make up *the* Church. This is also sometimes referred to as “church invisible” because there is not way we can see who and how many are a part of it. Yet before we use one biblical idea to deny the importance of another, namely the importance of the local church, we should remember that “most every reference in the New Testament [to the church] is about the church local”, by which I mean “a group of Christians who are a part of a collective, covenant group, who meet together for worship and ministry.”⁵ The importance of the local church is inescapable when one reads the New Testament and a churchless Christian is an anomaly. So while “every Christian should understand that as believers we *are* the church,” we must also remember “that a key function of a church is to gather in worship and then scatter into our respective vocations for the glory of Christ.”⁶

So with the rest of our time this morning I want to make a biblical case for the idea that you cannot come to Christ without coming to his people because the Gospel creates the Christian community.⁷ There are so many places I could show you this idea in the New Testament, but for the sake of time I will just mention a few representative texts, but rest assured we will see several others throughout the course of this series.

First, listen to these words that Paul writes to the Galatians to show them how having a relationship with Christ shapes our relationship with each other.

“for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. ²⁷ For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.” (Galatians 3:26-29)

What a beautiful picture. As individuals we are united with Jesus through faith. Paul says that we were baptized into Christ and have put on Christ, which means that Christ’s perfect record of righteousness has

been credited to our account through faith and we are becoming more and more like Him as a result. We are united to Him in these profound ways. But when you, as an individual, are united to Christ, you are also united to every other individual who is united to Christ.

And one of the most beautiful things about that unity is the diversity it springs from. The Gospel creates a kind of community like none other because it brings together people from all sorts of backgrounds, that the world keeps apart. *“There is neither Jew or Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”* That’s got to be one of the best verses in the Bible. It’s why I love the growing diversity in our church. It doesn’t matter where you come from, what side of the political aisle you identify more with, what shade of pigment you carry around in your skin, how much money you have in your bank account, or whatever other distinction the world may use to divide us...in Christ we are one. Brothers. Sisters. Children of God. Family. Seriously. That’s not just something we say. That’s core to who we are. We must not settle for “loosely affiliated service attenders.”⁸ He died to make us brothers and sisters. The world needs to see that unity.

If you are a Christian we have the most important things in common. You and I have the same story (saved from sin and death), the same passion (the glory of Christ), the same struggle (sin), the same hope (the coming Kingdom), the same authority (the Word of God), the same future (eternal life), and so on.⁹ Most importantly we have the same Father, Savior, and indwelling Spirit. And that’s thicker than blood. It doesn’t do away with our differences. It shows the power of the Gospel to bring us together to the glory of God despite those differences. And this has implications for our witness as we will see in the coming weeks.

We, according to Paul, *“are all one in Christ Jesus.”* In other words, we cannot be one with Christ without being one with God’s people. In the Gospel, God gives us Himself and He gives us to one another.¹⁰ But where is that oneness expressed? The local church. So, for example, Paul says to the local body of believers in Rome...

“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.” (Romans 12:4-5)

This is not the only place the analogy of the body is used to describe the people of God (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:17; 12:12, 27; Ephesians 4:12; 5:23, 30; Colossians 1:24). We also find the people of God being collectively described as the Bride of Christ (e.g., Ephesians 5:31-32; 2 Corinthians 11:12; Revelation 19:7-8; 21:9), the family of God (e.g., Matthew 12:49-50; 2 Corinthians 6:18; Ephesians 2:19; Galatians 6:10; 1 Timothy 5:1), God’s house (e.g., Hebrews 3:6; 1 Timothy 3:14-15; 1 Peter 4:17), and the temple of God (e.g., 1 Corinthians 3:11, 16-17; 6:19; Ephesians 2:19-22; 1 Peter 2:5-7). To these more common metaphors we could even include things like a field, olive tree, flock, and vine. But what all the metaphors show is that when the individual is born again by the grace of God they are united to the corporate body, which is wed to Christ. Again, we cannot be one with Christ without being one with God’s people. Yet it may surprise people who tend to think about their salvation almost exclusively in individualistic terms that the New Testament speaks so frequently of salvation in reference to the corporate dimensions. How much does the corporate implications of your salvation factor into your thinking?

Looking back at Romans 12, we should notice one of the glaring implications:

“being formed together into one body gives us an obligation. We belong to the rest of the body. It is impossible to be in Christ and not belong to others. A Christian, by definition, has a connection with and a responsibility to other Christians. You cannot claim Christ and avoid his people. If God

is your Father, then his people are your family, and you are to treat your family as your Father wants you to. Church is therefore not a meeting you attend, but a body you belong to.”

This inextricable link between Christ and His followers was seared into Paul’s consciousness from day one, when he first encountered the Lord Jesus. Do you remember the story? Paul was traveling on the road to Damascus to continue his campaign of persecuting the Church when Jesus appeared to him and knocked him to the ground. He hears the voice of Jesus for the first time. “*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?*” This doesn’t compute, so Paul asks, “*Who are you, Lord?*” And the voice comes back, “*I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting*” (Acts 9:4-6).

Now let that sink in? Was Paul persecuting Jesus? Not directly. Not physically. He had never encountered Jesus. As far as he was concerned, he was persecuting the followers of Jesus. But as far as Jesus was concerned, Paul was persecuting Him. To persecute the Church, is to persecute Jesus. “The relationship between Jesus and his people is so tight that what you do to them, you do to him...Christ utterly identifies with his people.”¹¹ So what do you reason Jesus thinks about those who bad-mouth the people of God? What a sobering thought! And that thought never left Paul. He dedicated the rest of His life serving the Lord *by* serving the Church.

And it wasn’t just Paul who understood that. Time will allow for only one more example, so let’s take it from the Apostle John. John experienced such pure love from Jesus that he felt free to describe himself as the “beloved disciple” or “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” Imagine that. John’s writing his account of the ministry of Jesus and, of all the disciples, he feels like describing himself as the disciple whom Jesus loved. I have to admit, when I first read that as a new believer I couldn’t help but think that John had a lot of nerve! But I’ve since then realized that it instead flows out of the personal love that John felt from Jesus. He probably was not the only one to feel it and the other disciples may have even thought of themselves in similar terms.

But here’s why I mention that... John clearly understands a personal relationship with Jesus. He had one. It was profound. He felt like Jesus loved him as much or more than any one else because of all the grace Jesus had shown him. Nevertheless that profound individual experience with Jesus didn’t negate his understanding of corporate nature of his salvation. John understood that “conversion is an individual experience that is intended to become a congregational reality...When you were saved, you were saved into the church.”¹²

I’ll show you some examples of this line of thinking from John’s Gospel in the coming weeks, but today let me give you an illustration from one of his epistles. In 1 John we read the following...

“This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. ⁶ If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. ⁷ But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with...”
(1 John 1:5-7a)

What would you expect to come after that? If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, then we have fellowship with...God? Jesus? The Lord? But that’s not what it says, is it? Look...

“But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another...” (1 John 1:7a)

John is echoing what we have seen in Paul, namely, “the thought that fellowship with God and fellowship in the Christian community are intimately related.” And this corporate fellowship is intrinsic to walking in

the light. “Only when believers are walking in the light can we have fellowship with God, a fellowship that is embodied as fellowship with one another.”¹³ Or as Thabiti Anyabwile has put it,

“As we reach out to embrace the life of Christ and Christ Himself, we end up embracing others who are also embracing Christ. We enter the faith individually and personally, but we live the faith corporately and publicly. We know the life of God in our own souls personally, but we share that life with everyone else who knows it.”¹⁴

That’s every bit a characteristic of those who walk in the light as the last part of the verse, which reads, *“and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.”*

This cleansing from all sin was accomplished through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross as our saving Substitute. And, of course, this is what we are remembering when we come to the Table and share the Lord’s Supper. We have a Savior, the Son of God, who took on our full humanity and died the death we deserved. His blood was spilled and his body broken to purchase our pardon. His death brought us life. And we are commanded in Scripture to remember His saving work on our behalf through this ordinance, the Lord’s Supper.

Why, we might wonder, would the Lord call us to remember His sacrifice through this symbolic act? In part, because this is an act we take together. It’s a corporate act. It reminds us that sharing in His body has brought us into fellowship with the body of Christ. We don’t do this as individuals. We do it as a blood-bought family. There is a togetherness to this meal. Let me show you one place, in closing, where Paul places an emphasis on this in the New Testament. Turn with me to 1 Corinthians 11. When you get there, jump down to verse 17...

“But in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. ¹⁸ For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, ¹⁹ for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized. ²⁰ When you come together, it is not the Lord’s supper that you eat. ²¹ For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. ²² What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not.” (1 Corinthians 11:17-22)

It’s very clear that one of the main problems that Paul has with the Corinthians practice of the Lord’s Supper was that it was highlighting their divisions instead of their unity in Christ. Basically some of them were showing up early, eating all the food, and getting drunk. Their divisions were thus leading them to make a mockery of the Lord’s Supper, which was creating more factions among them. Keep reading. Verse 23...

“For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, “This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” ²⁵ In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” ²⁶ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.” (1 Corinthians 11:23-26)

Clearly, in Paul’s mind, to participate in the Lord’s Supper is to proclaim the Gospel. That’s the point of verse 26. Therefore, because the Supper is an announcement of the Gospel, it also carries with it the demands of the Gospel and calls for us to examine ourselves before we partake of it. Look at verses 27 and following...

“Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸ Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. ²⁹ For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.” (1 Corinthians 11:27-29).

Now this raises the question—what does he mean by “*discerning the body*”? This is a hotly debated expression, but I agree with Bobby Jamieson’s understanding on the matter.

“It’s a difficult expression, but I think it basically means perceiving and living out the connection between love for Christ and love for his people. If you’re proclaiming Christ’s death in the Lord’s Supper, and claiming its benefits as your own, then you’re putting yourself in the same place as everyone else who confesses and receives Christ. You’re setting yourself in the midst of Christ’s people at the foot of the cross.

And you can’t declare the Lord’s death while despising his people. The Lord’s death redeems and unites the Lord’s people. If your actions scorn and despise Christ’s people, you’re scorning and despising Christ’s death. If you celebrate the Lord’s Supper in a way that excludes and shames the church’s poorer members, it’s as if you’re saying Christ only died for you, not them.

So Paul’s point about examining ourselves and discerning the body is not that we can only come to the Lord’s Supper if there is no sin in our life, or no sin that we have not yet confessed to the Lord. None of us is perfect, and none of us can perfectly perceive and confess our own sins. Instead, Paul’s point is that we are to examine ourselves to make sure we haven’t severed the nerve between love for Christ and love for his people. This also implies that those whose lives boldly contradict their claim to follow Christ should not participate in the Supper (cf. 1 Cor. 5:9-11). But the Lord’s Supper should strengthen rather than scare off those of us who genuinely trust in Christ and struggle against sin...

The Lord’s Supper is about the whole body of Christ coming together to declare and delight in the saving death of Christ. It’s about proclaiming the death of Christ by embracing the body of Christ. It’s about coming together to cherish Christ and care for each other...[It’s about coming together to] renew our commitment to Christ and his people.”¹⁵

So then, as we share this meal, let us remember the Gospel that announces that Christ died for our sins and saves us freely by grace alone through faith alone in the work of Christ alone. Let’s remember that this saving Gospel has created our community with one another. And let’s remember that because of Christ broken body and shed blood, we have inseparable communion with both God and His people.

And all God’s people said? Amen. Pray with me...

¹ Tony Merida, *The Christ-Centered Expositor: A Field Guide for Word-Driven Disciple Makers* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016), 16.

² Ibid.

³ Sam Allberry, *Why Bother with Church?: And Other Questions About Why You Need It and It Needs You* (The Good Book Company, 2016), 27-28.

⁴ Trevin Wax, *Counterfeit Gospels: Rediscovering the Good News in a World of False Hope* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2011), 207-208.

⁵ Jason K. Allen, *Being a Christian: How Jesus Redeems All of Life* (Nashville: B&H Books, 2018), 22.

⁶ Wax, 192.

⁷ “Cyprian of Carthage famously said, ‘You cannot have God for your Father unless you have the church for your Mother.’ The Reformers echoed this statement. I think it’s accurate, as long as it’s qualified/ If we’re talking about salvation, I don’t want to give the church too much credit. The Holy Spirit births us into the kingdom; the church is the instrument, the ambassador that declares the gospel. But the quote is right if it means that loving God as your Father will lead to submission to the church’s motherly oversight. In that sense, I say yes.” Ibid., 201.

⁸ J. A. Medders, *Gospel Formed: Living a Grace-Addicted, Truth-Filled, Jesus-Exalting Life* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publishers, 2014), 167.

⁹ Erik Raymond, *Chasing Contentment: Trusting God in a Discontented Age* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017), 142.

¹⁰ Medders, 164.

¹¹ Allberry, 30-31.

¹² Allen, 122.

¹³ Karen Jobes, *1, 2, & 3 John* (ZECNT; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 70.

¹⁴ Thabiti Anyabwile, *The Life of God in the Soul of the Church: The Root and Fruit of Spiritual Fellowship* (Christian Focus, 2012), 29.

¹⁵ Bobby Jamieson, *Understanding the Lord’s Supper* (Nashville: B&H Books, 2016), 18-19, 38.