

Sam Storms
Bridgeway Church
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Sermon Summary #28

Why Must a Christian be in Community in a Local Church? Hebrews 10:23-25

Gina Welch is a graduate of Yale University, teaches English at George Washington University, and is the author of the book, *In the Land of Believers: An Outsider's Extraordinary Journey into the Heart of the Evangelical Church* (Metropolitan Books, 2010). Here is the description she provided of herself: "I am a secular Jew raised by a single mother in Berkeley, where we took a day off school in October for Indigenous Peoples, not for Christopher Columbus. I cuss, I drink, and I am not a virgin. I have never believed in God" (2).

Welch moved to Virginia and became a member of Jerry Falwell's *Thomas Road Baptist Church*, at the time a bastion of American fundamentalism. Yes, she lied about her identity. She lied about her reasons for being there. She lied about being a Christian. And in the end she betrayed a number of friends who thought she was someone she wasn't. She explains it this way:

"It wasn't that I had zero misgivings about going undercover – I did meditate on the wrongness of lying and the string of betrayals my project would likely leave behind – it was that I sort of managed to balance the whole messy moral equation on an unsteady ball bearing of cliché: *You have to break some eggs to make an omelette*" (9).

My purpose in mentioning Welch and her undercover endeavor isn't to debate the ethics of what she did. It was, in my opinion, highly unethical. Rather, I bring her up to draw attention to what she experienced while at Falwell's church. She found the politics repellent. The theology mystified her. And yet she said this about her experience of community:

"What I envied most about Christians was not the God thing – it was having a community gathering each week, a touchstone for people who share values, a safe place to be frank about your life struggles, a place to be reminded of your moral compass. Having a place to guard against loneliness, to feel there are others like you."

It's almost impossible to overestimate the importance of community. Knowing that others know you and won't turn their backs in disgust; being accepted and loved and encouraged and held accountable to your own stated spiritual and moral convictions; these are powerful influences in a person's life.

Here at Bridgeway we highly value community. In fact, we value it so highly that simply saying we value it seems pathetically inadequate. We hired a full-time pastor, J. J. Seid, to provide leadership over the development of community here. His job is largely to help you find your place in our church family, to help you get connected at more than a superficial level, and to encourage you to go deep with other Christians so that you can all, together, grow up in Christ Jesus.

Even someone who only pretended to be a Christian, like Gina Welch, discovered the incredible healing and supportive power of community. But it isn't because of something Gina Welch discovered during her two years at Thomas Road Baptist Church that we are talking about community this morning. She isn't the reason it is one of our four primary values at Bridgeway. Our beliefs on this matter are what they are because of what we read in Scripture. And there is no better place for us to look to find support for Christian community than right here in Hebrews 10:23-25.

This passage not only describes the necessity of Christian community and what our responsibilities are to each other as followers of Jesus, but *it also serves as a standing rebuke, albeit a loving rebuke, to the growing numbers of professing Christians who think it is entirely permissible for them to say they follow Christ while they consistently*

refuse to gather regularly with other Christians and to put themselves under the leadership of Elders and Pastors in a particular local church.

Back in 2005 George Barna wrote a book titled, *Revolution*. His thesis is that one can be a Christ-loving, Bible-believing, soul-winning, God-exalting Christian without any formal involvement in or connection with a local “church”. The absence of the latter, be it noted, is not because of circumstances beyond your control. It’s not that some people, because of geographic isolation or persecution or other factors, cannot find or plant or become involved in a local church. The Revolution is a movement of people who easily *could* but *refuse* to do so, believing that for them, at any rate, true spirituality and authentic obedience to God and a genuine, thriving relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ is possible only by forsaking membership in, support of, and allegiance to a local congregation of believers.

Our text today stands as a firm and unequivocal refutation of that horribly misguided and unbiblical notion. So let’s look at what it says.

I want to start with vv. 24-25. I’m not ignoring v. 23, but will return to it momentarily.

The “Habit”

Evidently there was a slight problem in Rome. Some of the people who professed faith in Jesus had developed the habit or custom of only showing up on occasion and neglecting to make regular attendance at and participation in the communal life of the church a part of their experience.

Notice the word translated ***“habit”*** (v. 25a). You don’t cultivate a habit overnight. It takes time. You find yourself immersed in a habit, often one you can’t shake or break, ***when you live unintentionally***. That is to say, you don’t get up each day with a plan for what is going to happen. You simply drift through life. You take things as they come without forethought or preparation or prioritizing the many things that compete for your time and allegiance.

It’s not that difficult to develop a habit of neglect when it comes to participation in the life of the local church. You miss a Sunday because you were sick. That’s not your fault, but the next week, although you are in perfect health, the Thunder play the early game at Chesapeake Arena and someone offered you free tickets. The week after that you have to work late and can’t attend your community group and you’ve accidentally overslept on the last two mornings you were scheduled to meet with your D-group at Starbucks.

The next Sunday you show up at the service feeling rather proud of yourself for having made it. You were even on time for once! But then friends invite you to the lake the following week, and the Sunday after that you found yourself way behind in that project your boss was expecting you to have finished and on his desk on Monday morning. And before you know it, it’s just easier not to make the effort. And it just seems to make more and more sense as time passes to devote your energy to other things that feel more immediately rewarding. And to top it all off, you sit down for lunch with a friend who tells you the same thing has happened to them and ***you suddenly feel affirmed. Your neglect is now validated by the fact that you’re not the only one!***

And with the passing of time and the repetition of the same pattern of life over and over and over you unconsciously find yourself relationally distant from the church and emotionally unfulfilled by it. You might even discover that you regularly justify to yourself such neglect by saying, “I’m doing ok. I’m not committing adultery. I still believe in God. And I just got a raise at work and my golf handicap has gotten considerably better. I like this way of being a Christian.”

Our author comes straight to the point regarding this sort of “habit” or “custom” and therefore so shall I: ***don’t do it, it’s sinful, it’s a recipe for personal moral and spiritual disaster***. The reason is found in the rest of the passage.

The “Meeting”

Now let’s be clear ***that the “meeting together” mentioned here in v. 25a is not simply the Sunday morning service***. In fact, given the fact that what happens at this sort of meeting is mutual personal interaction where Christians are

“encouraging one another” it would seem that ***he has in mind more of what happens in our community groups and d-groups than what we are doing today.***

Don't depend on me alone to encourage you or to stir you to do what is right! I'll do my best in the time God has given me. But it is your responsibility to do this for others and their responsibility to do it in turn for you.

I know this is difficult for some of you. You may have been raised in a church tradition like I was where small groups didn't exist. I was in church Sunday morning, Sunday night, and Wednesday night every week. But I rarely had any opportunity to do what is described here or to benefit from someone else doing it for my sake.

Make no mistake: ***what we are doing right now is absolutely essential.*** Hearing the Word of God read, preached, and applied, celebrating the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper, corporate prayer, corporate worship in song, hearing the testimonies of others whose lives God has touched or greatly used, are all crucial to the life of the believer. But when the early church gathered to do this there weren't several hundred people in one room as there are today. So when we make application to our context in the twenty-first century we see the relevance of this far more in our smaller community and d-group gatherings.

So don't think you've been faithful to obey this command when you slip in late to a large gathering like this, say "hi" to a few folks during the meet and greet, and then quietly slip out while the final prayer is being spoken. That is not Christian living. That is not what our author means by "not neglecting to meet together."

And clearly ***he is not talking about haphazard or sporadic meetings*** where you just happen to run across someone at Starbucks or the mall and you say, “Hey, since we're both here, why don't we obey Hebrews 10:25 and 'meet' for a little mutual encouragement.” That's fine if you do, but don't think that's what our author has in mind!

Furthermore, don't think the purpose of the meeting is so you can talk about why the Sooners and Cowboys won (or, conversely, lost) their games last week. The purpose of these meetings isn't to catch up on how the kids and grandkids are doing. It's not an occasion for swapping office stories or for debating how you plan on voting next Tuesday in the mid-term elections! The purpose of the meetings is clearly stated.

So what exactly are we supposed to do? What is it that is so important and so needed that God would move upon the author of this book to command us not to neglect regular gathering so it might be accomplished?

He mentions three things.

First, we are “to stir up one another to love” (v. 24a).

The sort of “meetings” or gatherings or assembly that our author has in view are the sort that make possible mutual interaction. There has to be time and opportunity for everyone to speak truth to others and to hear truth spoken personally to them. There has to be time and opportunity for you to stir up or incite or “provoke” other Christians “to love” others better. Love isn't easy, especially when it comes to people you don't even like! You need to know why you should love, how you should love, in what concrete ways you can love, and how to overcome your tendency to despise and ignore other people in the church.

And you need to come to these meetings thinking about how you can do the same thing for other people. Explore what might be the obstacles to their love. What is it about their personality that hinders them? What truths in God's Word have they failed to fully grasp that may be keeping them back?

Sunday mornings are essential. But they aren't enough! And they are not the ideal occasion or setting in which you can speak to others what needs to be said so they will be motivated to love others more passionately. And if you're the one who isn't loving well you need to be with people who can take time to speak into your life and call you to account and explain the countless reasons why you need to learn how to love the unlovely better than you do.

I don't know where I heard it but I love the phrase ***“urgent intentionality”***. It means that when we gather we are urgently intentional about accomplishing something worthwhile. We are diligent not just to kill time or hang out.

There's too much at stake to waste our time and energy on things that not only won't help us love better but actually serve to undermine our commitment to do so.

We see the "intentionality" in our author's mind when he uses the word "**consider**" at the start of v. 24. Think in advance about what you are going to say. Have a plan. Give it some forethought. Don't come unprepared. "Consider" every person that you know will be present. Ask God to give you some insight into their situation. Ask the Spirit to give you discernment and perhaps a word of prophecy or exhortation to help them love better than they already do. Craft your "meeting" so that when you leave you feel more equipped to love, more motivated to love, and filled with greater wisdom to know how to do it well.

In other words, don't drift aimlessly into a meeting. Come on a mission! Come on the lookout for those in greatest need.

By the way, do you find it as fascinating as I do that love, the most important Christian virtue, the most crucial of the fruit of the Holy Spirit, is designed by God to be awakened and sustained in your soul as you meet regularly with other Christians and listen to their exhortations and then in turn exhort others as well? That's remarkable! Love is the fulfillment of the Law, says Paul (Romans 13:8). Loving God and loving your neighbor as yourself are the first and second most important commandments. To think that we would deliberately ignore and neglect those gatherings where this love can be stirred up and strengthened in us is simply unimaginable.

Second, we are "to stir up one another to . . . good works" (v. 24b).

I find it interesting that the goal here isn't simply to love and live a life of holiness. ***The goal is to be an instrument in the life of someone else so they can!*** That doesn't mean you can ignore the responsibility to love and walk in godliness. After all, the others in the group ought to have you in mind when they show up at the meeting!

And let's not conclude that the "good works" here are only internal to the church. Certainly that is involved, but he also means that we are to stir up each other so that we might learn how to live a godly life in an ungodly world. Doing "good works" in the context of church life isn't that hard. Everyone expects it of us. ***No one comes to church or to a community group with a plan for committing sin! But we often enter the world at large with precisely that thought in mind.*** So be diligent to think of ways that you can help others resist the temptations they'll face and say No to the invitation to join the guys at the strip club.

Third, we are to "encourage one another" (v. 25).

This is just one of the dozens of "one another" texts in the Bible. Elsewhere we are told to "love one another" (1 John 4:11) and to "welcome" one another (Rom. 15:7) and to "serve" one another (1 Peter 4:10) and to "submit" to one another (Eph. 5:21) and to "do good to" one another (1 Thess. 5:15) and to "exhort" one another (Heb. 3:13) and to "admonish" one another (Col. 3:16) and to "speak to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs" (Eph. 5:19) and to "comfort" one another (2 Cor. 13:11) and to "instruct" one another (Rom. 15:14) and to "forgive" one another (Col. 3:13) and to "confess our sins" to one another and "pray" for one another (James 5:16) and to "show hospitality" to one another (1 Peter 4:9).

Now here is a critically important question. ***How do we encourage each other to love and to obey the Word of God? What are we supposed to say? To what are we to direct their attention?*** The answer is found back in v. 23. I told you we would return to this verse and now we see how it ties in with vv. 24-25. So let me ask again: What is the root cause of love? What is it that will best motivate yourself and others to good works?

I believe the answer is ***ever-increasing confidence in the certainty of God's promises to us in Jesus Christ!*** We need to make the goal of our meetings the strengthening of one another's faith and belief in the truthfulness of all that God has done for us in Christ! "Where do you get that, Sam?" I get it in v. 23. Love and good works grow in the rich soil of hope in the truth of what God has promised.

Look closely at v. 23 – ***"Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful."*** We have a "hope" that is grounded in what God has revealed about his gracious purposes for us in Jesus. This "hope" entails not only our present salvation but our future glory in Christ. One day our redemption will be

consummated. One day we will be rid of these fallen and corrupt bodies and will experience what the Bible calls glorification. One day we will forevermore live on a new earth.

As we teach each other and remind each other and press deeply into each other's hearts truths like this it helps us hold ever more tightly to the confession we've made regarding them. And this is what awakens in us a desire to love others and a desire to say No to sin and Yes to God's ways.

But how can I hold fast to my confession of this hope in a world filled with wickedness and injustice and people who can't be trusted? The answer is in the second half of the verse: The God who promised us these things is "**faithful**"! He won't lie to you. He won't make a promise and then break it. He can be counted on to come through on everything he said he would do. He is faithful!

That's why it's important to devote time in your group to reading and studying the great and gracious acts of God in Scripture. Talk about creation! Talk about the exodus! Talk about the giving of the Mosaic Law! Talk about the great prophetic passages of the OT! Talk about the promises of a coming Messiah! Talk about God's character! Talk about the Incarnation, where God became human in Jesus! Talk about his sinless life! Talk about his sacrificial and atoning death! Talk about his resurrection! Talk about his second coming! Talk about how God has granted you eternal life through faith in this glorious Savior! This is what you encourage one another with. This is the food with which you feed not only your soul but that of others.

And the simple undeniable reality is that you can't gain this hope and certainly cannot grow more confident in this hope if you only curl up under your covers and cut yourself off from other Christians who need this hope as desperately as you do. You can only grow in this hope so that it will produce love and good works in community with other Christians who are just as needy and weak as you are.

So, I hope you can see now the connection between v. 23 and vv. 24-25. ***The kind of love that helps others and magnifies God is the fruit of hope rooted and grounded in the faithfulness of God. The kind of good works that blesses others and glorifies God is the fruit of hope rooted and grounded in the faithfulness of God.***

I have two more points and then we're done.

The Reason why we must be Urgent

First, look closely at the conclusion of v. 25. The importance of meeting regularly to stir up one another to love and good works, the importance of meeting regularly to encourage one another to hope ever more fervently in the promises of a faithful God, is grounded in the fact that with each passing day we come closer to the end of the age when Christ will return.

And according to numerous texts, ***the end of the age will bring with it increasing chaos and temptation and persecution and threats and trials and hardship. As we approach the Day of Christ's return there will be more and more trouble, more and more cause for stress, more and more Satanic opposition.***

I hardly need to mention this to you. Just open your eyes! If you can't see the rapidly increasing decay of our society, morally, politically, economically, and spiritually, then you are dull and dense and beyond my ability to convince you otherwise! It will become increasingly difficult to be a Christian in the days ahead. Finding an excuse to bail out and join the other side will be increasingly easy when the pressure starts to mount. Never before have we so desperately needed each other!

Isolated, Lone-Ranger-Christians who think they can make it on their own and they don't need the local church are destined to fail. Those who dismiss all this "one-anothering stuff" and this call for mutual encouragement are worse than fools.

Community Groups, D-Groups, and Spiritual Gifts

The second thing I want to mention in closing isn't found in the text. But it's found elsewhere in God's Word.

People ask me all the time how we at Bridgeway incorporate and express spiritual gifts in our large, Sunday morning meetings. And I tell them that it is very hard to do. We are under time pressure and it's difficult to make room for prophecy and word of knowledge and praying for healing and many of the other gifts. We do it as well as it can be done, but ***the primary place for the use of your spiritual gift is in a small group***. All three, four, or five hundred of you can't speak in a gathering like this. All of you can't exhort and encourage others or remind them of God's promises. You can't exercise mercy or serve as you would like to. But this can happen if you are part of small group!

You need to set aside time so that you aren't rushed and to wait patiently for the Spirit to move. It's only in a small group that you can create a safe atmosphere so people don't have to be afraid of failure. They can take risks they would never take on a platform in front of 500 people.

Conclusion

So, what should you do next? How do you respond to a passage like this? The first thing is to observe that J. J. Seid is listed on the back of the bulletin as our Pastor for Discipleship and Community. That means he is here to help you break the habit of non-participation in small groups. He is here to help you get connected. He's not the only one who can do this, but that's his job description.

We so highly prize and treasure community at Bridgeway that we've made it one of our four ministry values. And the time is never better than right now for you to overcome your fears and suppress your anxiety about meeting new people and obey God's Word. And for others of you, the time is never better to approach J. J. or me or any of our pastors and Elders and say: "I think God may be prompting me to lead a group. What should I do next?"

Don't put this on hold. Don't delay. Don't fall back on excuses you've used before. There is too much at stake. What's at stake is the eternal welfare of your soul!