What Really Matters in Our Meetings

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Preacher: Bob Kauflin

[0:00] The title of this event is Extraordinary, the Weekly Gathering of the Local Church.! And I don't know if when you saw that title, if you saw that title, you thought, yeah, he doesn't know my church.

Like, it's anything but extraordinary. Like, maybe if you really, really ordinary, the weekly gathering of my church.
Or subordinary, the weekly gathering. And what we hope through our time together is to see you return with fresh faith to your local congregation.
Because as you may have guessed, the Christian life is not about conferences. It's not about events. It's about what Jesus is building, which is the local church.
So whenever we do something, Sovereign Grace Music does something, we're always very aware that whatever we receive here is meant to serve you in your local context.
[1:05] Tonight, I'm going to talk about what really matters in our gatherings. And this is not a text message. Only one of the messages I'm going to give is taken from a text.

I prefer to preach from a text, but this is a kind of a workshop-ish event. And so we want to do the best, do all we can to make this a time where you go home with practical, specific tools that will serve you in your congregation.
So as you seek to serve your church. So it begins with asking the question, like, what's most important about what we do?
I would imagine even in a group this size, we have a lot of different backgrounds. You know, if you put our Sunday meetings next to each other and compare them, there'd be some real differences. And that's been true throughout history. You know, you have similarities and you have, sorry, differences. You have formal and informal meetings. You have word-oriented and sacrament-oriented meetings.
[2:18] You have planned and spontaneous meetings. You know, meetings that excel at planning and then meetings that just really love it when everything's by the seat of our pants.

Sovereign Grace has its own little history. It's a liturgical history. We began in the 1970s. We were born out of the Jesus movement. So if you've seen Jesus' revolution, that's us.
I mean, we were that era. That was my era. I got saved in 1972. And they got it right. All that stuff was happening. And it was a crazy, crazy time.
So our meetings at that time looked like a lot of singing. You'd have some people sharing some prophetic words and then preaching. That was the liturgy.
And, you know, it worked. People kept coming back. And we thought, this is great. Then we started reading our Bibles. And started studying what the church had done for centuries.
[3:25] And realized that not everything we were doing was helpful. I mean, a lot of it was. People did keep coming back. People's lives were changed.

Not everything we did was wise. And not everything we did was biblical. So we started thinking about it more. And trying to discern what's really important.
Now, when you read your Bible, you realize God doesn't give us this specific meeting structure. Some people act as though he did, but he didn't. You can't find it in the Bible where, you know, there's one way of doing things.
But there are better ways of doing things. And generally, a meeting that you've thought about will go better than a meeting that you haven't thought about. Generally speaking.
So here's the question we're going to seek to answer in this little time. What are the, some questions.

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[4:29] What are the closed-hand, open-hand issues when it comes to our weekly gatherings? Like, what should we have real convictions about? And what things should we kind of lose or wrong? Doesn't mean we can't have preferences and desires.

But what are the most important things? What can help us plan? What's biblical? What's cultural? What's context? That's a good way of defining it.
Or separating the categories out. What's biblical? What's cultural? What's context? And we're going to seek to address those questions. And rather than laying out a specific practice that you should follow, what we're going to do is consider five values that should inform and direct the choices and decisions we make about our gatherings.
Now, you may not be in the position of making those decisions. But that's okay. Even if you aren't the one who makes the decisions, you want to have these values in mind as you participate in your gathering.
Each of the five values has two priorities. The first is an indicative value. In other words, it's something that just is true about our gatherings.
[5:46] So each value, there's something that this is the way God set it up. The second value is something that we pursue as response to that first priority, that first value.

So here we go. The first one shouldn't surprise you is God. Our gatherings are God initiated and they're meant to be God exalting.
So there you have the indicative and the, not the imperative, but the fruit of that. The indicative, what's true? Our meetings are God initiated. What should that mean for us?
We should seek to exalt God in them. When we think of worship, as I mentioned in the call of worship, we usually start with ourselves. I mean, it's sad, but we usually do.
You know, we're singing, we're praying, we're lifting our hands maybe. We organize things, we read scripture. You know, we're doing all this stuff. But when God presents worship to us, it doesn't start with us.
[6:51] He starts with him. Because God is the one who initiates our worship. He starts it. He's the one who tells us what it should be like.

And we see that throughout history, throughout scripture. God put Adam and Eve in the garden and said, I want this perfect relationship with you where you submit to me and you enjoy my presence and you will know the fullness of my love for you.
And Adam and Eve said, no. No, thanks. We can figure this out on our own. You've got most of it right, God. But in the issue of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, we think this will be better for us.
And obviously it wasn't. So who comes running? Who comes after Adam and Eve after they sin? Well, God does. Adam, where are you?
It's God who, after the flood, establishes a covenant with Noah. It's God who reveals himself to Abraham in the fields of Hebron.
[8:04] It's God who gets Moses' attention through a burning bush that's not being consumed by the fire. It's God who calls his people together at Mount Sinai to reveal his laws.

It's God who speaks to the prophets through the kings. It's God who sent his son to redeem us. It's God who sent his Holy Spirit so that we might know his love and be transformed by it.
God's done all this. He's always the one who takes the initiative in our relationship with him. I don't know how you came to the Lord, but when I look back on how I came to the Lord in 1972, I think I did absolutely nothing.
Nothing. I was raised Roman Catholic. I was going to become a priest. Went to a junior seminary in freshman high school. It closed down at the end of that year.
Hopefully there wasn't any connection. This is the kind of guys we're getting. We're shutting this thing down. I stayed. Went to high school. Freshman year in college.
[9:12] I thought I was in. I thought I was going. And a guy from Campus Crusade, which is not crew, knocked on my door, kept knocking and said, Hey, I want to get with you.

I want to get with you. And I said, No, I'm good. I'm good. I'm good. And finally I got with him. And then there in the student building of Temple University, the fall of 1972, he explained to me how there was nothing that I could do to ensure that I would see God after I died.
And that he would welcome me into his presence. That only what Jesus did was sufficient for that. I wasn't looking for that. God did all that.

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And that's how he is. That's what our relationship with him is like. When Jesus sat down with the woman at the well. John 4.23. She says, The hour is coming and is now here when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth.
For the Father is seeking such people to worship him. He's coming after us. We don't gather as a result of our own desires or planning or impulses.
[10:23] We gather because God wants us to behold his glory and to be transformed by it. That's why we gather. He's initiated our relationship with him and he calls us to gather in his presence.

For what purpose? To exalt him. To make much of him. So David says in Psalm 34. I will bless the Lord at all times.
His praise shall continually be in my mouth. My soul makes its boast in the Lord. Oh magnify the Lord with me. Let the humble hear him be glad. Oh magnify the Lord with me. And let us exalt his name together.
Let's go after this together. He doesn't want to do it just by himself. He's found something so good, so amazing. He says, let's do this. Let's exalt God together. That means when we are meeting, we're not gathering just to talk about God.
We're not just gathering simply to consider him or to share our feelings about him or to share our thoughts about him, to philosophize about him, or share our opinions about him.
[11:30] We are gathering to exalt him. We are gathering to exalt him, to magnify him in our minds and in our hearts and in our lives.

He is a specific God, not some vague deity, a God that we make up, a God of our own choosing, made in our own image.
We're exalting the triune God, Father, Son, and Spirit who rules history, the nations, and our hearts. We lived in Philadelphia for 10 years, and I loved it.
We didn't end up in the city, but I love every time I'm in a city, just looking at the diversity of people. We live in Louisville. It's not quite as diverse as Boston. We live in, I mean, Boston is a city where you just, different kinds of people everywhere.
And you know what I like to think when I'm looking at that? Jesus is Lord of every one of them. There's no one that he is not Lord of.
[12:35] And I want them to know it. I want him to be exalted because he is a certain way and not other ways. And I want people to know him.

Ephesians 2.18 says, for through him, through Jesus, we both have access in one spirit to the Father. There is a God that we know who's not a single person God.
He's a tripersonal God, which is amazing because that means he loved, he existed in love before anything existed. And now he wants us to know that love.
He invites us into it. So we exalt him for it. And that exaltation one day will be universal. Psalm 150, verse 6, let everything that has breath praise the Lord.
Why? Romans 11.36, for from him and through him and to him are all things.
[13:37] To him be glory forever. Amen. We read verses like that sometimes. Just kind of read over them and just go, yeah, that's great. Yeah, from him and through him.

That's earth shattering. That should cause us to shake in our boots that we know this God. So what I'm going to do for each of these points is draw some implications from it for our meetings.
If our meetings are God initiated and they're meant to be God exalting, what does that mean? Well, although God is invisible, he's spirit, we can't see him. He's to be clearly perceived in our meetings. He's to be clearly preeminent and honored and heard and treasured. There is a God that we have a relationship with that we love and we want to see exalted.
So people should get that. We should get that. It's not just a meeting. We are exalting God himself. We don't have to feel the burden of performance or production.
[14:40] Meetings shouldn't burn us out. If God initiated this, if he's the one supplying all the strength and all the ability and all the desire and everything that we need, and our part is just to exalt him, that means the success of the meeting isn't ultimately dependent on what we do.

It's dependent on what God has done, what he is doing, and what he will do. And we are gathering to marvel at and to live in the good of the God who has called us to gather into his presence.
It's so unburdening. Three, no one should be impressed with our plans and preparation and production as much as they are with God's word and worthiness and works.

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Say that again. No one should be more impressed with our plans and preparation and production than they are with God's word, his worthiness, and his works.
The most important thing about our gathering is not our creativity. It's not our originality. It's not our innovation. The most important thing about our gathering is our listening and faithfulness and bearing witness to who God is and what he's done and what he's said.
[16:01] That's what we're called to do. That's what we're called to exalt. And then our gatherings are to be innately and expressly Trinitarian. Trinitarian. We come to the Father through the Son in the power of the Spirit.

We address Jesus as our brother and friend and King and Savior. We address God the Father as the architect of the plan of salvation. Although God, the triune God, has conceived of salvation, God the Father in the Bible is described as the one from whom all things originate.
Through Jesus in the power of his Spirit. But we think about these things and it just makes God more glorious. So that's part of what it means to exalt him. But we can't spend any more time on that. Second value.
Scripture. What a surprise. Our gatherings are Scripture governed. The Word of God rules over, governs our gatherings.
And they're meant to be Scripture fueled. They're meant to be Scripture fueled. When people attend a concert of their favorite musician or band, they express their devotion in various ways.
[17:11] They might bring a poster. They might dress like them. Or they might go crazy on social media. They'll sing along with them. Or they might shout or dance or try to touch them.

They'll do anything short of destroying property. Well, sometimes even that happens. But they're kind of free to do what they want to show their adulation of the musicians. God's not like that.
He's not a rock star. He's God. So he's the one who gets to define what's appropriate and right and pleasing to him. We can't say, well, God, I'm just being really sincere in what I'm doing.
Sincerity is not enough to make it pleasing to God. It has to be what he has told us to do. Saying, I worship God in my own way, on the golf course, by silent meditation, by waving flags.
That's how I do it. That's not enough. We're to worship God the way he has told us to. So how do we know what constitutes God-pleasing worship?
[18:15] Well, he tells us. That's why he's given us his word. A man named Herbert Bateman IV, in his book Authentic Worship, says this. From the beginning, all records of worship, whether erecting altars or performing circumcision, always express a response of submission, obedience, and trust in God's verbal statement of relationship, his word.

So we see throughout the Bible that when people aren't submitted to, obedient to, and trusting in God's verbal statement of relationship, his word, things don't go very well.
Adam and Eve didn't trust God's word. Things didn't go very well. Satan said, did God actually say? Started to question his word.
In Genesis 4, God has regards for Abel's offering of worship, but not Cain's. Something about Cain's offering wasn't in line with what God wanted him to do.
In the second commandment, God prohibits worship through images, which the Israelites rejected as they danced before the golden calf in Exodus 32. Didn't go well for them.
[19:33] Leviticus 10, Nadab and Abihu offer up strange fire, which we're not quite sure what that was, but God didn't authorize it, and God struck them dead. This is serious. In the New Testament, Jesus speaks of the authority of God's word in our worship when he quotes Isaiah 29.

This is in Matthew 15, 8 and 9. This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.
Does that mean traditions are bad, like commandments of men? No. Traditions can be helpful. But when traditions contradict, ignore, or minimize what God has clearly directed us to do in Scripture, then they end up becoming idols.
And there are a lot of churches that started on a good path, seeking to obey God's word, but those practices became mere traditions that weren't rooted in God's word, and then have no life in them.
God cares about how we worship him. And he governs our worship by his word. And so that means his word is to fuel what we do when we gather.
[20:54] Throughout history, God has maintained his relationship with us, not merely through experiences or visions, but through his word.

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One of my favorite examples of this is in Exodus 33 and 34, when Moses asks God to show him his glory. And God says, I'll cause my goodness to pass before your eyes.
So then in Exodus 34, we see what God does. He says, The Lord passed before him and proclaimed.
The Lord. The Lord. A God. A God. Merciful and gracious. Slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.
Keeping steadfast love for thousands. Forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin. But who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation.
[22:10] This is right after Israel had danced before the golden cow. What did God want Moses to see? He wanted him to see who he was.

How did he show him who he was? By speaking to him. And you can't imagine, we can't imagine how assuring those words were to hear.
I am the Lord, the Lord of God. Merciful. And gracious. 2 Timothy 4.2 We're commanded to preach the word.
Be ready in season and out of season. Reprove, rebuke, and exhort with complete patience and teaching. In other words, this is to continue in our relationship with the Lord. Hebrews 2.1 tells us we need constant reminders of God's word.
Therefore, we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard lest we drift away from it. It is so important that we not build our gatherings around our traditions, our preferences, things that seem to be working, but around what God has actually said.
[23:18] And then we do that in a way that stirs people's hearts. That causes them to treasure God's word and not despise it. And not ignore it. Colossians 3.16 says that it is the word of Christ that is to dwell in us richly as we sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in our hearts to God.

So, what are some of the implications of a meeting that is Scripture-governed and Scripture-fueled? Well, one, we should maximize in our gatherings what is mandated or implied by Scripture and minimize what isn't.
So, some of you are probably familiar with the regulative principle, which is in this camp, in this area. The problem with the regulative principle, which says that we don't do anything in our gathered worship, apart from what God has commanded or inferred, is that it leaves a lot of space for, like, wisdom issues.
And so, I won't go any more on that. So, yes to preaching. Yes to praying. Huh? When we're together. Yes to congregational singing.
Praying is one of the things that we realize we weren't doing when we gathered together in Sovereign Grace. We prayed sometimes, but it wasn't a conviction. Like, yeah, we're to pray together.
[24:37] That's something we're supposed to do. Yes to spiritual gifts. All of them, I would say, as a continuationist. The Lord's Supper. Greeting. Reading Scripture. No to performances.

Movie clips. Painting. And other things. Musical hype. We want to maximize what God has told us to do. Minimize everything else.
Two, we're to sing the Bible. Pray the Bible. Read the Bible. Preach the Bible. See the Bible. One of the things we changed when we planted a church 13 years ago in Louisville, Kentucky was to begin in our ending and our meetings with the Word of God.
We've never done that before. But wow, what a difference it makes when you tell people, hey, God's calling us together. God's sending us out. I used to connect the, I used to plan the meeting with just picking songs.
You know, I'd pick five songs. And there you go. I've planned the meeting. I've done my part. Now, when we do our planning, we don't even pick the first song until we've got the call to worship. Because that song is coming out of that call to worship.
[25:43] And we want that to make sense. We want there to be progression. So another part of having your people see that the Scripture's fueling the meeting is by explaining things theologically, which I'm going to do a whole session on that tomorrow, on transitions.

So I'm not going to spend time on it here. Three, preach expositionally. Say what the Bible says and the way God said it. Obviously, that's one way the Bible fuels our meetings.

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Four, seek to move people more by the word than by music. Music is a very powerful emotional motivator.
It affects our emotions. The word of God is meant to affect our emotions. This is why when we started tonight, you know, we just read the Bible. We didn't have to have.
Is this a song? Just want to welcome everybody tonight. Thank you so much for coming. Just help your souls at peace this morning.
[26:49] It's an end. You know, music can communicate emotions, but a lot of times it can be manipulative. And we can start to think that really, unless music's playing under the Scripture, it's not that good.

Don't let your people think that. The word of God stands on its own. Is it wrong to play music under Scripture? No. Is it needed? No.
Let's put the emphasis in the right place. Number five, evaluate responses, people's responses, more by Scripture than your culture. So I've been all around the world and seen different congregations respond in different ways.
I put this as a mixed crowd right here from what I observed earlier. Some of you are just ready to let it all out! And others are like, who's this person around me? A little nervous about what they're going to do.
And I would say, we want to let our responses be evaluated by Scripture and not our culture. It was up in the Northwest years ago. It was in the early 2000s, and it was a hip culture.
[28:00] Maybe it still is. Hip, cool culture. So this particular church was really hip and cool. And I was talking to them about, you know, people don't seem to be very happy.

Well, yeah, it's just the culture. Well, you know, you know, I don't think our culture tells us how to respond. I think it's the Word of God.
So I picked this passage in Nehemiah 8, 5 and 6, because I think it's so instructive as to what affects us. Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people. And as he opened it, all the people stood. Well, there's a response. And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, Amen, Amen. Lifting up their hands.
There's nothing about music there. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. Just showing reverence for God's Word.
[29:02] I mean, there are other passages that we could look at, but let's let the Word of God evaluate our responses rather than our culture. All right, number three. The gospel.

So we've got God, we've got Scripture, and now we've got the gospel. Our gatherings are gospel-grounded and meant to be gospel-driven.
So this is, oh, it's just, you know, gospel-centeredness in some phases, some areas of the church, you know, is popular at times.
You know, gospel-centeredness, gospel-centeredness. You know what? To God, the gospel's always popular. It's always popular. Throughout Scripture, God has called His people together to celebrate His acts of deliverance and salvation.
Psalm 96, verses 1 and 2. Oh, sing to the Lord a new song. Sing to the Lord, all the earth. Sing to the Lord, bless His name. Tell of His salvation from day to day.
[30:10] So for the Israelites, that meant when they gathered, they were to thank God for, sing about, and remember the way God had delivered them from the bondage of Egypt and brought them into the promised land.

That was huge. And then after the exile, they celebrated God delivering them from Babylon and restoring them to the promised land. For Christians, we have something greater to celebrate that those things pointed to.
It means that our fellowship with God is grounded in Him reconciling us to Himself and assuring us of His eternal purposes for us and for creation.
So 1 Peter 3.18 says, For Christ also suffered for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that He might bring us to God.
If Jesus, through His substitutionary sacrifice on the cross, did not bring us to God, we would have no ability to approach Him.
[31:14] It would be impossible. We have no expectation that He should hear us or bless us or draw near to us. But because of the gospel, we can draw near to the living God.

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There's a passage in Hebrews 10 where after chapters and chapters of explaining why Jesus is a better high priest of a better covenant, a better mediator, offering better sacrifices and saying He can do what the old priest couldn't do.
The old priest could just go into the Holy of Holies once a year, once a year, bearing the sins of the people. No one else was ever allowed in there. Ever.
Ever. And so in verse 19 of chapter 10, after He's shown clearly that Jesus is a greater high priest, He said, 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, His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near.
He says, come on. Before it was, don't draw near, don't draw near, don't draw near. Now in Jesus, draw near, 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.
[32:56] Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering. Why? Because He promised His faithful. It's the best news. It's the best news.

That's the gospel that grounds us. That's what our meetings are grounded in. Paul didn't hesitate to remind those who was writing to of the gospel.
1 Corinthians 15.1, I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you which you received in which you stand. He goes on to say it's of first importance.
Colossians 2, 6, and 7. Therefore, as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, rooted and built up in Him, and established in the faith just as you were taught.
In other words, keep doing this. Keep doing this. Don't go somewhere else. Don't think there's something better to give people than the gospel.
[33:58] David Pryor in his 1 Corinthians commentary says, we never move on from the cross only to a deeper understanding of the cross. It's amazing.

So that means the gospel should drive our meetings. You could say the gospel should fuel our meetings, but we had to pick another word. So it drives our meetings. Sometimes that's through the structure.
You know, some churches are built around a gospel ark where you start with the adoration of God, then the acknowledgement that we are not like God, that we have sinned, so we acknowledge our sin, but then there's the assurance of pardon, that God has done something for us in Christ, and then a response of thanksgiving, giving and hearing His word and communion.
That's one way of doing that. But there are other ways of doing it. Just making sure that people understand when we gather, hey, you know what? Apart from Jesus Christ, we're all in a lot of trouble.
Just never forget that. Never forget that. Apart from what Christ has done, we are all damned in hell for eternity. But because of what Jesus Christ has done, we get to enjoy pleasures as His right hand forevermore.
[35:10] Forever. Forever. That's amazing good news. The gospel is the power of God, he says in Romans 1, 16.

That means technologies, technologies, techniques, and good transitions can never replace the gospel, which alone is the power of God.
That's why we sing songs like we sang earlier. When Satan tempts me to despair and tells me of the guilt within.
Has that ever happened to you? Have you ever felt despairing of your sins? Well, here's what you do. Upward I look and see Him there who made an end of all my sin.
What? What do you mean He made an end of all my sin? Well, here's what happened. Because the sinless Savior died. Okay, He's sinless. My sinful soul is counted free.
[36:13] Well, what, what, what? Free from what? Well, free from the penalty of sin, free from the power of sin, one day free from the presence of sin. Well, how did He do that? Well, for God the just is satisfied to look on Him.

Pardon me. And pardon me. It's no news like it. That's how we come. That's how we can come. That's why I celebrate the Lord's Supper.
We proclaim His death until He comes. So, what are some of the implications of a meeting that's gospel-grounded and gospel-driven? Our songs and prayers and preaching are meant to be gospel-exalting and expanding, not drawing attention to something else, not unclear, not vague.

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They are pointing to Jesus Christ, who He is, and what He's done. Two, we emphasize what God has done over what we have to do. In other words, the indicative of the imperative.
People shouldn't leave our meetings every Sunday with a lot of shoulds and a lot of musts. They should leave with, I can't believe it, and a lot of get-tos and want-tos.
[37:31] That's what a gospel-driven meeting will produce. Three, the gospel should, we should be aware of the gospel in terms of the structure of our meetings. There's a story we're telling.

We'll talk about that tomorrow. We should regularly observe the Lord's Supper and baptism. And then, another effect is diversity is seen more as a fruit than a pursuit. If our meetings are gospel-ground and gospel-driven, we will see people of different ethnicities, age brackets, financial states, educational backgrounds, we'll see different kinds of people coming.
Why? Because we're gathering around what unites us, and that is Jesus Christ. All right, fourth value. And these will, and then we'll sing another song.
Spirit. Our gatherings are spirit-empowered and meant to be spirit-dependent. Our gatherings are spirit-empowered and meant to be spirit-dependent. Just as God initiates our worship, he empowers it by his spirit.
Thinking back again to Jesus and the woman at the well, he assured her that whoever drank of the living water he offered would never thirst again. A few chapters later, he says that whoever believes in him out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.
[38:52] And John says in John 7, 38, now this he said about the spirit whom those who believed in him were to receive for as yet the spirit had not been given because Jesus was not yet glorified.

So when Jesus said, the father is seeking those who worship him in spirit and truth, he's saying we can't worship God apart from the spirit of God.
So everything we experienced in the meeting is empowered by the spirit of God. Anything good of lasting value, it's empowered by the spirit of God. Do we believe that?
It's not empowered by our incredible planning and ingenuity. It's empowered by the spirit of God. That's what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12, 11.
All these are empowered by one and the same spirit who apportions to each one individually as he wills. Because our gatherings are spirit-empowered, our worship of God is lifeless, insufficient, and unable to bring fruit apart from the spirit's work.
[39:58] It's the spirit who brought our dead spirits to life through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus according to the plan of the Father. And he empowers what we do when we gather.

Now if we're aware of that, that will make us spirit-dependent. Which means that Paul says in Philippians 3, verse 3, for we are the circumcision who worship by the spirit of God, there it is, worship by the spirit of God, and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.
Put no confidence in the flesh. What does it mean to be dependent on the spirit? Not putting confidence in what we're going to do to impress the people who come or to inspire the people who come.
We can't do that. The spirit can. And we want to be depending on him to do that. The spirit works in a surprising number of ways.
Paul lists in 1 Corinthians 12, verse 4 through 6. He doesn't listen, but he says, there are varieties of gifts, but the same spirit. There are varieties of service, but the same Lord. There are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all and everyone.
[41:23] In other words, every aspect of our meeting, we are depending on the Holy Spirit for it to bring fruit. This is extremely important what happens behind a pulpit. It's just not the only thing going on in the meeting.

And the spirit's empowering everything else that's going on and we want to ask for the spirit's help in those things. Our singing, just like it's to be filled with the word of Christ, our singing is to be characterized by the spirit's work.
Ephesians 5, 18, do not get drunk with wine for that is debauchery, but be filled with the spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. Our prayers are a sign of our dependence.
Jude 20 says, but you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, which leads to what are the implications of seeing our gatherings as spirit-enabled, spirit-empowered, independent.

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One, it will increase our prayer life dramatically. Like, if we're not praying for our meetings, we don't really believe that our spirit-empowered. It doesn't just happen.
[42:33] And it certainly doesn't happen because of our planning and gifting. It happens because the spirit of God works. Two, it will increase our faith, expectation, and anticipation that God will work in our midst when we gather.

You know what? The spirit doesn't look at how many people are in our congregations attending on a Sunday morning to determine whether or not he's going to show up. Aren't you thankful for that? And yet, we can begin subtly to think, oh no, if I have a big congregation, if we have big attendance, then the spirit's really there. That's not how he, that's not how he works.
I mean, there's 120 people in the upper room and that was a pretty big, a pretty big event that happened there. God doesn't need a lot of people. He needs people who are trusting him and depending on what he can do.
We'll begin to see, three, we'll begin to see how many ways the spirit is actually working. You know, as we look around and see people standing at the door greeting, oh, why there's a gift of hospitality.
[43:39] We don't pass the plate anymore, I don't know, but as you see people getting out their phones to give, you see, there's a gift of generosity. As you see people, someone praying for someone, there's a gift of faith.

You just see the spirit working all around your church. And then we'll expect to be emotionally engaged and physically affected because it is the spirit who's doing the work.
It's not dependent on our personality, our background, our experience. It's dependent on the spirit of God and what he's seeking to do. And what is he seeking to do? He's seeking to exalt Jesus Christ in us and through us.
All right, last one. Church. We've got God, we've got scripture, gospel, we've got the spirit, and the church. Our gatherings are church defined and meant to be church engaged.
church. Anybody here with a church of more than 500 on a Sunday morning? Okay, 300, is everybody 300 or less?
[44:42] Let's see. Okay, someone around there. We can be tempted as small, our church is between, it's just a growth spurt, so we're between 500 and 600 right now.

We have been between 300 and 400 for years, a long time. But here's the temptation to think that, you know, somehow we've got to perform something.
We've got to do, we've got to get something going here. You know, if we're going to grow, we've got to make something happen. So let me just say a few things that the church is not. Sunday gathering. Sunday gathering is not a production company offering a weekly event defined by lighting and video and staging.
It's not. Sunday gathering is not a theological lecture filling people with head knowledge but doing little to affect or shape their passions and desires.
Sunday gathering is not a business venture or a fast food franchise driven by principles of pragmatism and marketing and financial success.
[45:50] Some churches are very much that way. Sunday gathering is not a place to push the boundaries of creativity for the sake of doing something new. The Sunday gathering isn't a theater performance where actors whose words and actions bear no resemblance to their daily lives get up in front of people.

Our Sunday gatherings are extraordinary. extraordinary. They're extraordinary. It's the church redeemed from every tribe and language and people and nation redeemed from sin's bondage! in God's wrath and God's wrath by the blood of Christ gathering to bear witness in the presence of God and to each other of his greatness and glory and goodness in Jesus Christ.
Our gatherings are defined by the reality of what Jesus came to do. In him, Ephesians 2.22, in him you are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.
That's what he's doing in that group of people. Building a dwelling place for God. We're not being built up into an emotional or spiritual and musical experience but into a spiritual house.
[47:09] 1 Peter 2.4 and 5. As you come to him a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

Christ. The church has insiders and outsiders. Paul talks about in 1 Corinthians 14 where he says when the church comes together and outsiders or unbelievers enter.

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Church is not just made up of the people we see in the room. It's made up of God's people past, present, and future and when we gather we are experiencing a foretaste of the marriage supper of the Lamb at the end of time.
And we're gathering with all those who have gone before and all those who are presently around the throne and all those who will one day be around the throne. Paul talks about it in, I'm sorry the writing of Hebrews talks about it.
If you believe Paul wrote Hebrews then it's Paul but if you don't then that's fine. You have come to Mount Zion this is Hebrews 12 22 you've come to Mount Zion to the city of the living God. This is what's happening every Sunday morning.
[48:19] We're coming to Mount Zion the city of the living God the heavenly Jerusalem and to innumerable angels in festal gathering and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven and to God the judge of all and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect and to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

That's who's gathering. It's the church as God has defined it. That means that our meeting should engage the church. We are the household of God 1 Timothy 3 15 which is the church of the living God a pillar and buttress of the truth.
In other words we're not oriented towards a performance we're not oriented towards a production or people on the stage. We're not seeking to build a bunch of spectators.
who are part of an audience. We made a very conscious effort I don't know if this has ever been a temptation for you but not to refer to the people in the congregation as the audience. They're the congregation.
We are all members of the congregation being led by Jesus in the praise of the Father. Every member is involved. We're welcoming one another instructing one another greeting one another we're comforting one another serving one another addressing one another admonishing one another encouraging one another church is engaged church is meant to be engaged so what does that look like?
[49:51] Well first we'll be conscious of the uniqueness of what's taking place. There's no meeting in your city in your town in your village in your whatever it is you live in that's like your Sunday meeting on Sunday morning.

There's nothing like it. A lot of big important meetings happening business meetings political meetings education meetings nothing like what's happening in your church on Sunday mornings. Two we'll involve the congregation in various ways we'll look for ways to involve them of course as the church grows bigger that becomes more complicated a little more challenging still can be done through serving through prayer through ministries through scripture readings through music three the sound of the congregation will be our priority when we sing we want people to be able to hear their voices and we want when the music drops out the instruments drop out for people to sing louder I've been in different contexts where when you drop the instruments out people sing softer because they aren't used to not being supported by the instruments oh no we're supporting you these instruments are supporting the congregation doesn't mean you can't hear them you need to hear them to lead in some meaningful sense but you do allow space for people to hear their voices number four pastoral care will be the forefront of our planning and preparation and leadership we're not just running a meeting we are caring for people's souls you can't run the meeting without the people that's part of what it means to shepherd the flock we'll be historically aware number five mining liturgy songs and teachings of the past just finding out what's there that Christians have been doing for centuries that we would benefit from someone said tradition is the living faith of the dead traditionalism is the dead faith of the living
I think that's a great way of putting that so we want to be committed both to reforming the dead faith and reclaiming the living traditions of the past aren't Sundays extraordinary when you put all those things together we've covered a lot of ground tonight but those five values are true of every church no matter the size age the denomination the leadership the geographical location the ethnicity or musical style those five values are true of every one of those churches God himself calls us together he speaks to us he brings us near through the redemptive work of Christ he's present with us by his spirit and he glorifies himself through our unity and while you may not need to change everything and you shouldn't change everything about what you're doing on your Sunday meeting it's worth asking questions about everything it's worth asking questions is God really being exalted

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do we really believe he's brought all this together does scripture really govern what we do or are we just doing what has been passed down is the gospel really the grounds of what we are doing every Sunday and are people aware of that do we believe that the spirit is empowering everything we do and are we dependent do we feel our need for the spirit to work in our midst every week or do we just assume because we've been doing this for like four years we're good to go it's not how God works

Jesus said you gotta be part of the vine you can't be cut off and expect to bear life you gotta be always part of that vine and then finally are we are we aware that what God's doing is not just through us it's through the whole church that's what defines us we're a body we're a temple we're a building we're a field we're all doing this together it's amazing my prayer is that these values will guide us in terms of what we might need to add what we might need to take out we might need to change or what we might just to give greater emphasis to because I doubt if you're here that any one of these would come as a shock to you especially governed by the word of God what a surprise it's just how we apply it and how we think about it and it's amazing just to think that what we do every Sunday is just a foretaste just a foretaste of what we'll be doing in eternity not singing necessarily but endlessly receiving and celebrating the love of the triune

[54:50] God for our eternal joy and his eternal glory that's what's happening every Sunday morning it's worth our attention it's worth our careful planning it's worth our eager anticipation so let's pray and then we're gonna sing one final song the band can come on Father we thank you that you have given us the privilege of gathering with your people every Sunday what what an amazing thing it is we we pray that it become more amazing in our eyes that we see the way you see you see we see our meetings the way you see them not as simply us getting together but your presence in our midst calling us together to experience your goodness the riches of your grace the immeasurable riches of your grace to us in Jesus

Father we pray that we would be more dependent on your spirit we pray that our meetings would be fueled by your word that we would treasure your word we'd esteem and value it that we'd be affected by it we pray that every member of the church would feel more and more a part of what you're doing to bring glory to your name through Jesus Christ and the power of your spirit we thank you Father for doing all these things in Jesus name amen

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