

When, how, and why should we gather?

Which church meetings are we going to restart and why?

Why?

The 'Why' – as Simon Sinek has pointed out,¹ is the key.

Acts 19:32 – this is a great verse!

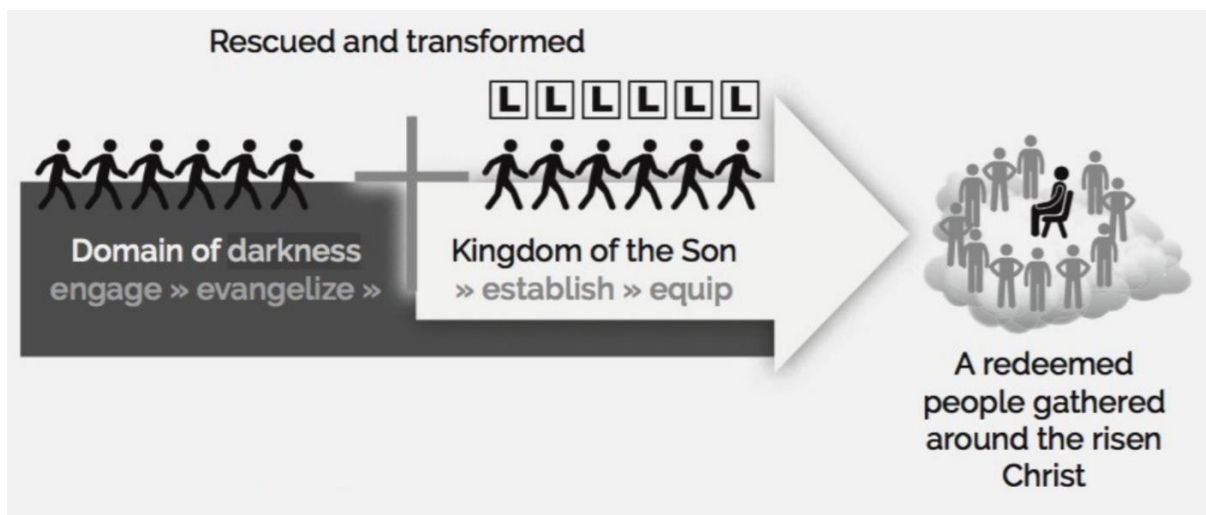
The assembly [*ekklesia*] was in confusion: Some were shouting one thing, some another. Most of the people did not even know why they had come together [*sunerchomai*].

I'm sure Luke wants us to laugh at this. But notice the words that are used for assembly and for coming together are the words normally used in the NT for the church. Wouldn't it be terrible if Christians were coming together and we didn't know why.

So why do Christians meet? Imagine a non-Christian asks you – and this become a big issue in the pandemic – Why do Christians gather?

Discuss...

The following diagram is from the Vine Project.²



It's really helpful in capturing the task of the church, our great mission desire – for people to 'move to the right' – from the domain of darkness, through the Cross, into the kingdom of the Son (Col. 1:13).

¹ https://www.ted.com/talks/simon_sinek_how_great_leaders_inspire_action?language=en.

² <https://thevineproject.com/>.

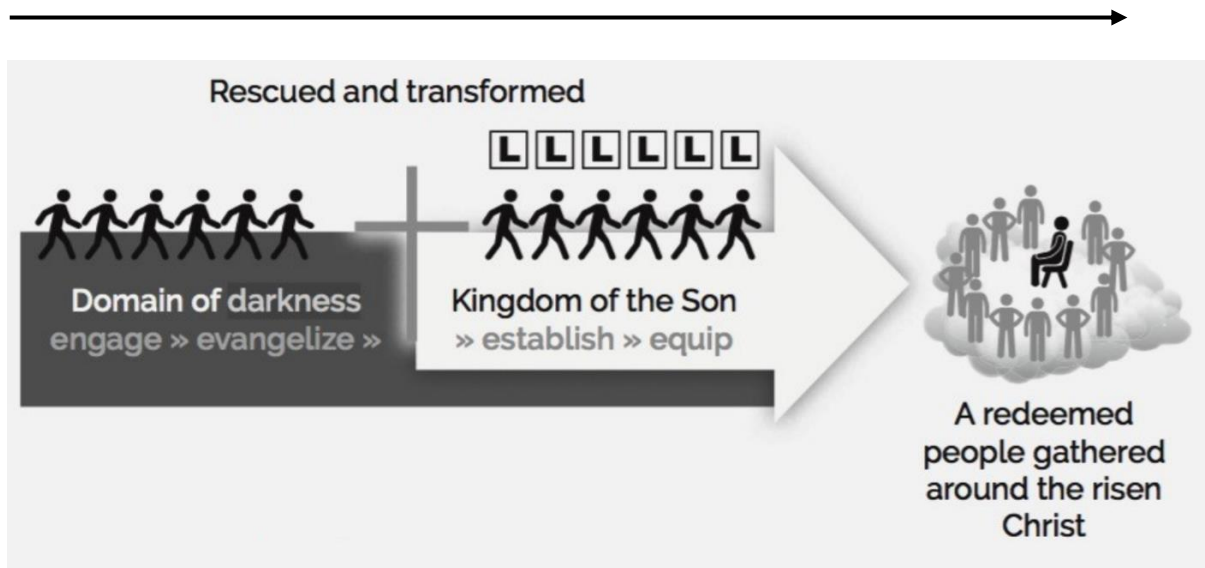
And what is particularly important for our consideration of why we gather is the end point – the eschatological reality we’re heading for – ‘a redeemed people gathered around the risen Christ.’ That is extremely significant because the shape of the end is the shape of how we get there.

So I’d like to add a bit to the diagram – which I think is what the Vine Project guys agree with but I just want to bring it out:

Physical Gathering – (Psalm 122, 133)³

Purification of gathered worship (1 Kings 18; Malachi 1:11; 1 Timothy 2)⁴

Being built up together in a united diverse body (1 Cor. 14:26; Eph. 4:11-16)⁵



In all these things the end shapes the way.

We are going to be physically gathered, in resurrection bodies around a physical risen Christ – so we gather now physically.

We are going to gather to worship Christ for eternity – so we gather now to worship him.

We are going to gather as a perfectly united, wonderfully diverse crowd around the throne – so we gather now as unity in diversity to be built up into the fitting bride of Christ.

³ This is a theme Christopher Ash has brought to our attention in his [Remaking a Broken World](#).

⁴ The early reformers (Calvin, Luther, Knox) saw themselves as having a ministry akin to Elijah when he gathered Israel at Mt Carmel, sought the turning of hearts back to the Lord and then had the idolatrous priests slaughtered. Not that Calvin and Luther were slaughtering priests but their great concern was to purify worship that “In every place ...pure offerings will be brought to [the Lord], because [his] name will be great among the nations” (Mal. 1:11 cf. Titus 2).

⁵ “For our Lord did not institute the order which we must observe when we convene in his Name, solely to amuse the world by seeing and looking at it; rather, however, he wished that profit would come from it to all his people: as Saint Paul witnesses, commanding that all which is done in the Church be directed towards the common edification of all” (Calvin, [Preface to the Genevan Psalter](#)).

How?

What do we mean by we / gather / church / meetings?

Garry Williams has helped us here in parsing four different types of gathering/meeting.⁶

1. Gathering of Christians as church – i.e. the Word of Christ preached and the Sacraments rightly administered – what is called in reformed language ‘Worship’
2. Gathering of Christians not as church – e.g. as small group,⁷ Sunday school or a training session
3. Meeting as Christians online – this is where there is interaction (e.g. Zoom) but we have not physically gathered – Garry Williams says we should reserve the word ‘gather’ for physical gathering
4. Viewing of a live Christian gathering/meeting/content – we may be watching simultaneously but there is little/no interaction (e.g. a YouTube/Vimeo livestream)

These are all valid – but there are different costs and benefits of each of those in relation to edification.

- Gathering of Christians as church – the worshipping gathered church – this is where we find the special operational presence of God⁸ – it is where Christ has promised that he will be found and the presence of God will be experienced in the greatest fullness on earth.
- The physicality of gathering is hugely important – it is simply not gathering without physical presence
 - o James 2:2-3 – notice the importance of the physical placement and proximity of people – even the smell of the filthy clothes that makes it difficult to sit next to someone who’s been sleeping on the street – and so the demonstration of the power of the gospel and Spirit when these very physical barriers are overcome. It is in sitting next to each other (rather than in dispersed in our own homes watching Zoom/TV) that there is the greatest demonstration to the heavenly realms of the incredible unity in diversity of the church (Eph. 3:10).
 - o Singing to one another, intra household – cannot be achieved on Zoom (without a cacophony). Do you remember that wonderful moment when you first experienced congregational singing again – coming from all directions, surround sound?
 - o Praying together – this is interesting because it’s one of those meetings that many of us are finding works quite well online. Acts 4: was there ‘raising their voices together a Western style, one person speaking and the rest saying Amen at the end,’⁹ or was it a more non-Western style prayer meetings where everyone is praying simultaneously (which has taken me some time to get used to but is an extraordinary experience) with gradually one or two voices emerging as the hubbub dies down? Acts 20:36-37 – imagine the elders and Paul kneeling down together, probably in a circle, probably hands on each other. There’s weeping and embracing and kissing – very physical.

⁶ See particularly <https://pastorsacademy.org/blog/parsing-the-abnormal-church-gathering/>.

⁷ Not all age groups, genders, gifts.

⁸ See Garry Williams’ talk at the recent Music Ministry conference ([YouTube, 27 mins](#)) or 2015 talk at LS conference ‘Pragmatic Minimalism and the Presence of God’ ([MP3, 53 mins](#)). Andrew Wilson is also helpful on [why church is more like marriage than watching a football match](#).

⁹ Which is clearly a valid pattern – 1 Cor. 14:16.

- Eating together – as church family – and also with non-Christians as Engage/Evangelise – think of Levi’s party – where you have the disciples but also the tax collectors and sinners (Luke 5:29-30)
- Meeting online
 - Ability to pray together and have edifying conversation in a way that may not be possible at an in-person gathering when we are at a stage of pandemic restrictions where everyone is masked and distanced
 - Increased accessibility for housebound, elderly
 - Potential to interview distant mission partners or have a mission partner join a small group for an evening
 - In the same way as at an in-person gathering, we are aware of who’s hearing the Word with us – we are accountable to one another... I know that you are hearing the same message and I know that you know that I am hearing it too.¹⁰
- Viewing online
 - Anonymity – may be particularly helpful for Engaging and Evangelism or for dealing with sensitive discipleship issues (e.g. mental health, pornography, abortion)
 - Potential for hearing from others in different places – in many ways it is not dissimilar to the epistle form – unidirectional – giving an awareness of wider church (e.g. Ephesians – you Gentile Ephesians are part of something much bigger and diverse of cosmic importance)
 - Singing – where there are pandemic restrictions preventing congregational singing Garry Williams admits there may be an advantage of viewing (over Zoom meeting or congregational gathering) in the particular respect of being able to sing in your home with your family or with a friend of ‘bubble’ or another family (depending on current restrictions)

When?

Let’s audit what we’re doing.

- Using the following chart, write on all your current gatherings and meetings. You might want to distinguish gatherings from meetings – perhaps with CAPS/lower or different colours. If you haven’t planted yet either put on the gathering/meetings of your current home/sending church or the gatherings/meetings you’re thinking of having in your plant.
- Then draw lines from those meetings to the 4 Es above. What are you expecting each of your gathering/meetings to accomplish – which one or more than one of Engage, Evangelise, Establish, Equip?

¹⁰ Christopher Ash, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/assembly-required/>. Ash is arguing for physical gatherings and this would be better but there is a sense in which *this particular aspect* works ok in a small church Zoom setting where you can see who else is there.

Engage

Evangelise

Establish

Equip

	5am	8am	11am	2pm	5pm	8pm
Sunday						
Monday						
Tuesday						
Wednesday						
Thursday						
Friday						
Saturday						

Then ask:

- How does that chart look? Overall impression? Too much, too little, overbalanced? Which aims are you covering well and not so well?
- Which are your most effective meetings/gatherings right NOW [in this post-covid world]? Effectiveness will be a function of How many people are coming X How much are they being moved to the right
- Are there any that would be more effective if transitioned from meeting to gathering or gathering to meeting?

Simple Church

Thom Rainer, who recently wrote *Post-Quarantine Church*, wrote an earlier book, *Simple Church* and some of that thinking comes into his new book. Rainer's argument is:

- Too many church meetings means members are too busy for mission relationships. I'm sure we've seen that danger. It is very easy for people to end up hiding in church activities, become inward-looking and lose any missional dynamic.¹¹
- Too many church meetings also has impact on members family life, marriages and discipleship of their children.
- In the pandemic:

¹¹ Glen Scivener makes a similar argument <https://christthetruth.net/2017/06/05/the-missional-necessity-of-keeping-people-out-of-church/>.

- There has been an appreciation of simpler pattern of life, less cluttered with activities [not for everyone and it may be short term – I think people are quickly going back to lots of activities – but there may be some truth in this]
- People are exhausted – do not have the energy for 100 new meetings
- This time of pandemic has at the very least helped us to think what is really essential. Do we really need all these programmes and meetings?

There is a lot of truth here. It can be a helpful question to ask:

- If you had to reduce your gatherings/meetings to 3 or 2 or 1, which would you go for?

But I also want to push back a bit on the Simple Church argument that less is always better. When you look across the global church and back through church history, the pattern has rarely been simple church with minimal meetings.

Here are two examples:

John Calvin, Geneva

	5am	8am	11am	2pm	5pm	8pm
Sunday	Worship	Worship	Catechism classes	Worship		
Monday	Ordinary worship					
Tuesday	Sermon					
Wednesday	Worship					
Thursday	Sermon					
Friday	Ordinary Worship	Company of pastors Scripture study ¹²				
Saturday	Sermon					

“As it is a thing much required in Christianity, and one of the most necessary, that every one of the faithful observe and uphold the communion of the Church in his neighbourhood, frequenting the assemblies which are held both on Sunday and other days to honour and serve God.”¹³

- Worship = a full service with sermon, sacraments and prayer (spoken and sung)¹⁴
- Ordinary worship = a stripped down service with no singing or Lord’s Supper but the potential for baptisms

From 1542 onwards the practice of a sermon every day of the week seems to have been from ‘demand’ – people wanted to hear Calvin preach.¹⁵

¹² Various called the congrégation, conference des Escriptions, or colloque – open to non-pastors

¹³ [Calvin’s Preface to the Genevan Psalter \(1545\)](#).

¹⁴ These were Calvin’s 3 elements of gathered church worship (ibid).

¹⁵ [Jung-Sook Lee, Spiritual renewal through worship reform in Calvin's Geneva, Torch Trinity Journal, 7:1 \(2004\)](#)

From 1549 it became a legal requirement for all Genevan citizens to attend worship twice on Sunday and for one member of a household to attend every day.¹⁶

In England, at a similar time, Cranmer instituted something quite similar with the Order for Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer and Holy Communion.

John Newton, Olney

Olney was an extremely deprived town.¹⁷ Newton started by securing funds from wealthy patrons to 'relieve the bodily suffering of his new parishioners, and then he was able to devote himself to the needs of their souls.'¹⁸

	5am	8am	11am	2pm	5pm	8pm
Sunday	Prayer gathering	Worship		Worship	Worship	Prayer & hymn gathering
Monday					Men's Bible Class	
Tuesday	Prayer gathering				Prayer gathering	
Wednesday					Classes for young people	Classes for enquirers
Thursday				Children's meeting	Worship (serving wider area)	
Friday					Society gathering ¹⁹	
Saturday						

All this was without a curate. Many of the 18th century evangelicals did more. Many had Morning Prayer at 5am every weekday.

Today, across the global church, daily gatherings are common. S Koreans often meet very early in the morning in clusters of households for prayer and Bible reading. In Egypt, evangelicals pastors will often provide a daily Bible exhortation for a gathering of church members.

Duncan Forbes, on the Roehampton estate has commented on how for those coming out of the 'discipleship' of gang culture a weekly Bible study is not enough, they need far more intensive Christian discipleship and more time throughout the week with Christian family.

[This is not to say that we should cut and paste. It almost certainly won't be right to do what Calvin or Newton did. That's what we were saying in the first session – times change, cultures change and,

¹⁶ Scott M. Manetsch. *Calvin's Company of Pastors* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 148-149.

¹⁷ 'Two thousand people sullenly fighting a lost battle with starvation' (Balleine, *A History of the Evangelical Party in the Church of England*, 1909, p. 102).

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 105. This source also provides the data for the following chart.

¹⁹ Societies were a hallmark of the 18th century revival – mid-week gatherings of keen Christians, converts and those who had been revived, for singing, prayer, fellowship, accountability and mutual edification.

even with exactly the same convictions, our ministry expression may look very different. We must work out what is more effective and healthy for this time and place. But at least this quick review shows that we shouldn't assume that Simple Church with minimal meetings is the default or only right option.]

Conclusion

Re-examining all our meetings and gatherings can be overwhelming. We can't change everything at once, we shouldn't do that and we don't have the energy even to re-think everything at once.

Kev Croft reminded me recently:

- What you could do – there are a lot of things we *could* do
- What you should do – there are quite a lot of things we really *should* do
- What you need to do now – we don't need to do everything *now*

Home work

Go back to your schedule:

	Engage	Evangalise	Establish	Equip		
	5am	8am	11am	2pm	5pm	8pm
Sunday						
Monday						
Tuesday						
Wednesday						
Thursday						
Friday						
Saturday						

And ask yourself:

- Which ONE gathering/meeting are you currently running (whether started in lockdown or continued from before) that you should think about **stopping**?
- Which ONE gathering/meeting are you **not** currently running (whether stopped in lockdown or never initiated) that you should think about **starting**?