

Meeting as a Congregation.

by Andrew Bonar

Gathering together in Christ's name is a vital part of the Christian life, and is essential for experiencing the presence and blessing of Christ, and for spreading the tidings of salvation to others.

Scripture: Genesis 4:26, Psalm 84:2, Psalm 87:2, Malachi 3:16, Matthew 18:20, John 3:16, John 20:19, Acts 2:42, Hebrews 10:25, Revelation 7:17

Topics: "Congregational Worship", "Presence of Christ"

Description

Andrew Bonar emphasizes the significance of congregational gatherings in worship, rooted in the biblical promise that where two or three are gathered in Christ's name, He is present among them. He traces the origins of public worship back to Genesis, highlighting the importance of communal worship as a means of receiving God's blessings and fostering spiritual growth. Bonar warns against the dangers of neglecting assembly, noting that true worshippers gather to reflect on God's name and attributes, which enhances their spiritual experience. He encourages believers to expect the presence of Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit during these gatherings, urging them to share the message of salvation with others. Ultimately, Bonar calls for a renewed commitment to congregational worship, anticipating the eternal gathering with the Lord.

Transcript

"For where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them"

(Matt. 18. 20).

I believe you will find the origin of public worship in the book of Genesis, that book of beginnings (4. 26).

Enos, the son of Seth, was the first preacher, and ministered to the first congregation; for so we understand the record, which says, "Then began men to call upon the name of the Lord"; that is, they began to meet in public assemblies. It was the first of the happy companies whose gatherings together have been continued ever since. In the Songs of Zion, special honour is accorded to those meetings of the saints: "The Lord loveth the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob" (Psa. 87. 2). The public assembly of His people on Mount Zion God loved more than all other gatherings, because this was a loud proclamation of His name; all the more because these gathered ones met with their eye on the altar and the atoning sacrifice. The sympathy, too, of such worshipping companies has always helped to give victory over selfishness. And the Lord gives more blessing when many are together than at other times, for

this very end.

We sometimes hear people, whose indolence and selfishness keep them at home, say, "We are as well occupied at our own firesides on the Sabbath day as we would be in God's house." That cannot be true, since God has enjoined us not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together (Heb. 10. 25). And it is very noticeable that, when a man ceases to come to the house of God, you invariably find, as a result, that family worship has no longer a place in that home; and, too often, the worship of the closet languishes, even if it does not cease. In the sanctuary God has special blessings which we must lose when we forsake the assembling of ourselves together. God likes (we may say) to give His best blessings to more than one at a time, on the lines of Ephesians 3. 18: "With all saints." And while this is the Lord's rule, you will find also this to be true in your own experience that the blessing you get along with hundreds of others is far more plentiful, and, perhaps, far deeper, than what you get alone. Suppose a shower of rain falling falls only on you, it would give you some refreshment, no doubt; but if, at the same time, it soaks the ground all around you, and makes every tree and every blade of grass drop with moisture, and softens the ground all around, the coolness and the refreshing is wonderfully intensified. When God's people come thus together in the name of the Lord, the Lord makes this His special time for sending down a plentiful rain.

But now, let me ask you to notice in this passage (1) Our presence together in Christ's name; (2) Christ's presence with us when we are gathered together in His name.

(1) Our presence together in Christ's name. The Lord expected that in all after times His people should thus gather together. He takes it for granted that this shall be the case. The words, "Where two or three are gathered together in My name," take for granted that this is a practice that would never fail. We referred to Heb. 10. 25, but long before, in the book of the Prophet Malachi (3. 16,) the Lord had made the gathering together of His people an ordinance: "Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another (you can see that this is a gathering together in His name), and the Lord hearkened "--hearkened to what was going on in this meeting, and marked down the attendance in His book of remembrance: "They shall be Mine in the day when I make up My jewels."

In the Acts of the Apostles (2. 42), and other passages, you will notice how continually the early Christians gathered together. Indeed, it is spoken of as a test of true discipleship: "They continued steadfastly in the Apostles doctrine and fellowship." It was Christ Himself who, by His example and suggestions, introduced this meeting together among His own. But you may say: "What is meant by 'In My name?'" It is not a mere gathering together in a meeting, for meetings may be convened for various purposes - social, political, or otherwise.

It refers to none of these. The magnet that gathers this meeting is "Christ's name." "When two or three are gathered together in My name." Think of what this name means. I refer to Malachi 3. 16: "They that feared the Lord spoke often one to another," and there you will find the Lord says, "A book of remembrance was written before Him for those . . . who thought upon His name." The name of the Lord expresses the sum of God's perfections. In another of the prophets (Micah 5. 4), you have it said: "He shall stand and feed in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord His God."

"In the name." How can they meet "in the name of the Lord?" The meaning is this: We come together to think of the Lord - His perfection and all concerning Him. A congregation of true worshippers is a congregation of those who "think upon His name." Often do we find the worshippers declaring, "We have thought of Thy loving-kindness in the midst of Thy temple"; "according to Thy name, O God, so is Thy

praise unto the ends of the earth." At one time we are led to deep meditation on His loving-kindness as a part of His name; at another time of His holiness; at another of His justice - His determination to deal with unrighteousness in the way of vengeance.

And then we stand still in amazement at the grace, the free love, that brings to us salvation. He has given us a Saviour, and in that name "Jesus," Jehovah who saves, is everything that enables us to approach the Holy One. You thus understand how meeting in the name" implies that we stand in the sunshine of that name, and bask in the bright rays that there fall on our souls. Might I even put it this way? Our meeting together as Christians should be like that of Moses, when the Lord came to him and put him in the cleft of the rock.

His prayer went up: "Lord, I beseech Thee, show me Thy glory" (Exod. 33. 18). (You prayed thus before you came together?) And the Lord answered the prayer when the glory passed by, and His own voice proclaimed His own great and glorious name: "The Lord, the Lord" (Jehovah, Jehovah), "the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity, and transgression, and sin; and that will by no means clear the guilty."

We meet to hear the proclamation of that name from the Cross of Christ, where it is we find the full significance of the Master's words in John 17. 6, 26: "I have manifested Thy name." Moses was so filled with adoring wonder and awe that he bowed his head toward the earth and worshipped. Blessed are we when our meeting together in that name affects us as it affected Moses. Are we not approaching at such a time the worship of the heavenly temple, where they oftentimes "fall down before the Lamb"?

And if in the Old Testament days the worshippers found intense delight in "gathering together," how much more should we in the fuller light of the Gospel? They longed, yea, fainted for the courts of the Lord. Their very heart and flesh cried out for the living God, who was to meet them there (Psa. 84. 2). Oh, with what joy they used to go up to the house of God, to "Give thanks to the name of the Lord!" (Psa. 122. 1-4). Are you, brethren, able every returning Lord's day to say, "I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the Lord."

(2) But I pass on, secondly, to speak of Christ's presence with those who have come together to enjoy the sunshine of His name. Our first and all-including loss by the Fall, was loss of communion with God. But all we lost the Lord restores to us in redemption. All our gatherings together may afresh bring before us the restoration of this communion that we had lost. The Lord comes to meet us ere ever we have come to meet Him. "Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I already present.

Some may be here who have not found Him at home. We bring you good tidings. We tell you that it is His wont to reveal Himself to souls in the meeting of His saints. Our text declares: "Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I." "There am I." The Lord Jesus meets those of His people who are thus gathered together, in a special and peculiar manner, such as He is not wont to do in your retirement. He met Cephas, no doubt, alone after His resurrection (1 Cor. 15. 5); but that was an exceptional case, and not meant to be the same as meeting Him in the gathered assembly.

It may be to such times of meeting that reference is made in the Song of Solomon, "Tell me, O thou whom my soul loveth, where thou feedest." And the answer is: "If thou knowest not. . . go thy way forth by the footsteps of the flock and feed . . . beside the shepherds tents." (Song of Solomon. 1 8). Christ Himself has special delight and fellowship with us in such gatherings. The Shepherd likes to be in the midst of His flock. But what does He then do? He says, "There am I."

Let us ask what this implies, "There am I." There is an attraction in that announcement, surely. Even if He did nothing, it is something to be near Him. There is sunshine there, though He should never speak a word. Might I say, it is as when the mother's little ones find their enjoyment enhanced amazingly by the simple presence and smile of her who so loves and whom they so love? But more still is implied when He adds, "In the midst of them." It is as if He would say, "I am to be the very heart of the meeting, and within the reach of all alike; not at one corner only."

You often hear a needless addition made to this clause, "In the midst of them 'to bless them and do them good.' " Keep it as it stands; let the simple words speak without paraphrase or addition. There is (we said before) majesty and a strange attractiveness in this simple clause, "There I am. It is as when He came to His disciples (John 6. 20, 21), saying, "I am He." Notice the effect, the calm, the peace. "Immediately the ship was at land." How divinely helpful, "I am there!"

"I am there!" But always take in along with this, "In the midst of them. " It suggests so much more: "I have come into the very centre and heart of the meeting." No sooner has He overtaken the two disciples going to Emmaus than you can easily see that, as He walks between them and communes with them, quickly sadness gives way to secret joy, till their hearts burn within them. And we go up to the Throne and observe, in the book of Revelation, the position He is wont to take. If we find Him "walking amid the golden candlesticks," then at another time, He is "the Lamb in the midst of The Throne" (Rev. 7. 17), the heavenly companies all gathered round Him!

Perhaps for this, among other reasons, that visit is fully recorded in John 20. 19, as a sample of what might be expected at such gatherings. He came to the upper room. Notice in passing, nobody heard the door open. Nobody, to this hour, knows how He got into the upper room. The disciples were met together in His name to talk about Him, and to think about Him, and the doors were fast closed and barred. But all at once they found Jesus standing in the midst. For it is silently He comes in among us, unseen; and all at once we find that He is here!

On that same occasion His first word was, "Peace be unto you," showing them His hands that spoke of the Cross, and pointing to His side that was pierced. Is it not just thus that He wishes us to be ever blessed when we are gathered in His name? He begins by speaking peace to our souls, peace through the blood of the Cross, through His pierced hands and side. You need never "gather in His name" without receiving a fresh view of the blood of Christ that gives peace to the soul.

Brethren, pray for your pastor, that he may never, to the day of his death, preach a single sermon, or be with you in any gathering together in His name, without pointing you to the blood shed for the remission of sin.

But there is still more here. After He had thus spoken, and led them anew to the source of true peace, He "breathed on them," saying, "Receive ye the Holy Ghost." When you gather together as a congregation, let me ask, Do you expect to receive the Holy Ghost? Perhaps you reply, "If we are believers, have not we the Holy Spirit already?" The Holy Spirit is in you as the water in a well; but the well may be very far sunk down, and so you need to cry, "Spring up, O well !" And every time you come together in the house of God you have special reason for expecting the springing up of this well, for you have this promise, and you can hold it up to the Lord: "If ye, then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him?" A father gives to his little children, not once or twice only, but from day to day, and likes to have them continually coming. Even

so, disciples who have the Spirit already come to get greater communications of the same Spirit. See that you always come up in the expectation of receiving the "eye-salve" to enable you to see more clearly; to get more from Christ's fulness of the fruits of the Spirit - "love, joy, peace, gentleness, meekness," and the like.

But even this is not all. He added, when breathing the Spirit upon them, "As My Father has sent Me, even so send I you." Go away now, and tell others about salvation and the Saviour. Go and spread the tidings to all men of "peace" by the Saviour's work: "The chastisement of our peace was on Him." Yes, remember every time we come together and as we go hence: "I send you, as the Father sent Me," to spread the tidings which have brought peace to your own souls. Sit not down in selfish enjoyment when your hearts are burning within you after some fresh discovery of the riches of grace in John 3. 16: "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." Go and tell men these same tidings. And if more were needed to induce you to do so, this might be added, viz., in the very act of telling your fellow-men of this salvation you yourself get immense gain. In a word, if you would have your sanctification carried on, if you would have your own communion perfected, go forth with these words ringing in your ears: "As the Father hath sent Me, even so send I you."

Come together, then, for these ends. In Revelation you see how Christ sends messages to "the churches," His gathered ones that meet in His name, but always with the ulterior view of their giving to others the water of life that they themselves have been tasting. Oh, dear people, let us seek to have more profitable meetings this winter than we have ever had. Let us seek to get a fresh start to-day in this direction. How much of this kind of gathering together shall there be? Will you every Sabbath drink of this well and run with its living waters to others? It is not eloquence, nor intellectual effort that the Holy Spirit delights to use; it is the preaching of "peace by the blood of the Cross." Let us, in this way, seek conversion in all our meetings, in our Sabbath schools, and wherever souls can be dealt with. Oh, let there be none here merely sitting on the steps of the ark, liking to hear that the door is still open - sitting, we say, on the steps, but not within, and so in danger every moment, for the door may be shut and the flood sweep them away. Shall the ark of salvation stand open while you will not cross the threshold? Who among us are merely formalists? You are so if you do not "gather together in Christ's name." You are mere formalists if you cannot truly sing that Psalm in which we declare: One thing I desired of the Lord, and I will seek after, that I may behold the beauty of the Lord, and inquire in His temple. You are mere formalists if not meeting with Christ, though you come to the meeting-place. But when you come with the full purpose and positive desire to behold the beauty of the Lord, then you may expect a meeting with Christ.

From 1 Cor 14. 23-25, we see that occurrences like the following often took place in the early Church: A hearer - not in Christ - would drop in, perhaps from mere curiosity, knowing that it was a gathering of those who were met in Christ's name. He sees that the worshippers are truly devout, and are seeking the Lord in downright earnestness. He sees that they listen with eagerness to the word spoken, and that they pray and sing with the soul and the heart. He may not know that that overpowering conviction which seizes on his soul proceeds from the presence of that Christ who said, "There am I in the midst." But so it is; and this Zaccheus-hearer falls down and worships and goes home to report, "God is in them of a truth."

Oh, brethren, is there convincing and convicting work in our meetings? Are there such prayers and praises, such intense feeling, that even a careless one, hearing what is spoken and listening to the prayers and to the songs of praise, is overawed in his inmost soul? Brethren, will you, henceforth, more than ever, aim at having such results in our congregational meetings? Oh, brethren, every week expect

and bespeak His blessing. If the Lord is present, every gathering will be a memorable one, because from our gathering together there will be tidings carried up to heaven that will create new joy in heaven over at least one sinner repenting. And look forward. Oh, for that eternal meeting, "For ever with the Lord!" "The Lamb in the midst of the throne." Oh, when shall it come!

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