

Getting the Church Back Together, or Why One Assembly Matters in Scripture and Practice

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Why do we have two worship services, when it would be more in alignment with our convictions to have one?

This has been a reoccurring question as we have considered the importance of gathering together for in-person worship over this past year. Throughout this season, the Lord has been teaching us about the importance being a church family and assembling together.

The short answer to this question about the number of our worship services is “*Yes, we want to hold one worship service.*” We recognize that our practice of holding two Sunday services does not match the pattern we observe in the New Testament. The longer answer is that OBC’s history serves to explain why we have two services; and the prayerful answer is that someday, we hope to have a single Sunday gathering.

In what follows here, I’d like to talk about each of those answers—(1) the biblical answer, (2) the historical answer, and (3) the prayerful answer with respect to this summer and what comes afterward.

One Assembly: A Biblical View of Gathering

There are many compelling reasons for a local church to hold one worship service on the Lord’s Day. Let me offer three—one from the Old Testament, one from the New Testament, and one from our contemporary non-application of Scripture.

The Old Testament pattern of worship gathered one people to one place.

In Exodus, God promised Moses he would deliver his people from Egypt and bring them to his holy mountain (Exod. 3:12). After ten plagues in Egypt, Yahweh fulfilled his word by leading Israel out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, across the wilderness, and to Mount Sinai. At Sinai, God revealed to Moses a pattern for worship that would be carried throughout the rest of the Old Testament and into the New. This pattern included a tabernacle that reflected the glories of heaven, a priesthood that mirrored the angels in heaven, and a calendar of worship that would regularly assemble God’s people around God’s house.

In the wilderness, when the twelve tribes encircled the tabernacle, the children of Israel worshiped at their tents as Moses entered the tent of meeting (Exod. 33:8–10). And when they entered the land, they were called away from their homes three times a year to assemble in Jerusalem (Leviticus 23). So important was this assembling that God promised protection from the nations, as Israel gathered in Jerusalem.

Both at Sinai and later in Jerusalem, worship included the assembly of God's people. Even with the problems of accommodating so many people—Passover eventually had to be celebrated on multiple days—the pattern of worship revolved around one people, praising one God in unison together. Even more, Psalm 133 speaks of the unity that existed among the priests who constantly stood before God, serving in his holy house. Put all this together, and you have a pattern of worship that gathered God's people to God's holy hill. There were not multiple places of worship, only one. And thus, there existed in Israel a pattern for gathered worship.

The New Testament practice of worship is found in local assemblies.

Entering the New Testament, we find Jesus telling the woman at the well, that there would no longer be one mountain where God would be worshiped (John 4:19–24). Because of the Spirit's arrival on Pentecost (Acts 2), God would gather his people all over the world. But importantly, such geographical expansion does not deny the place of gathering, nor the pattern of assembling as one unified body in various locations.

This truth may not be immediately evident, but as soon as we look at how the apostles spoke about local churches, we learn that the same commitment to unified gatherings in the Old Testament remained in the New. For example, in 1 Corinthians 1:2, Paul speaks about the "church of God in Corinth."

In other words, there is no such thing as a church devoid of place. That place might be in the shade of broom tree, in the cafeteria of a local school, or in the cramped quarters of a church building. The main point is that *wherever* two or three, or two or three hundred, of God's people are gathered in the name of Christ, a church is formed. As the Reformation taught us, a true church is a gathering of saints who rightly preach the Word and practice the ordinances. Even the phrase "where two or three are gathered in my name" comes from a discussion of church discipline, which is also practiced in the local church.

So from these two passages—1 Corinthians 1 and Matthew 18—we begin to get a sense of how the New Testament continues the practice of a unified assembly, even as it follows Jesus' command to go make disciples of all the nations. Indeed, what is changed in the New Testament is not the need to gather in a place (the Temple), but to gather in every place (local churches in all nations). As Malachi 1:11 prophesied, a day was coming when people who offer incense in every place.

Paul is evidently telling us this has been fulfilled in the gathering of saints in Corinth. But it is also true in the churches (notice the plural) of Galatia (Gal 1:2 ; 1 Cor 16:1) and the churches of Revelation 2–3. Each of these assemblies, as Hebrews 12:22–24 puts it, is a place where the saints are coming to Mount Zion. Because the Spirit has been poured out, we are now able to ascend the hill of the Lord from any address on the planet. Yet, the hill of the Lord is something experienced when the living stones of Christ are brought together. Local churches are identified as a specific gathering of the saints at a particular time and place.

The assembly of the saints is what constitutes a church. In fact, the identification of a people as one church is a point Paul brings up in multiple ways in 1–2 Corinthians. First, in correcting the abuses of the Lord's Table Paul in 1 Corinthians 10, he speaks of the church coming together: "When you come together" (v. 17), "when you come together as a church" (v. 18), "when you come together" for the Lord's Table (v. 20), and "when you come together to eat" (v. 33). Clearly, there is something unique that happens when the church "comes together," and not when the saints are apart from one another.

Critically, this coming together is not the random assembly of some Christians; it is the assembly of saints who know one another and who know when one of their members is missing. In 1 Corinthians 14:23, Paul writes about when “the whole church comes together.” Evidently, he expects the saints in Corinth to assemble together and to know when they are all there. Confirming this point, he later speaks of the “majority” of the church in 2 Corinthians 2:6. Without pressing language too much, it is axiomatic that a majority implies a given number, and that such a “number” recognizes when the assembled members are present or absent.

Such a practice of counting goes back to the church in Jerusalem, when 3,000 and then 5,000 were counted (Acts 2:41; 4:4). The apostles knew well the condition of their flock (cf. Prov. 27:23), and so did the other New Testament churches. For instance, Paul speaks in Romans 12:5 of the church as a people who are “members of one another.” Conversely, Paul can identify individuals who are members of particular churches. Phoebe is a servant from the church of Cenchrae (Rom. 16:1), and Paul met with the “elders of the church of Miletus” (Acts 20:17ff).

From all of these New Testament texts, we find a regular practice of churches assembling and knowing who is in their assembly. Accordingly, we should be a church who knows who our members are. This is necessary for the elders, but it is also imperative for all Christians.

As a member of Occoquan Bible Church, you should know who your family members are. If you were sitting down for a family meal, you wouldn’t start eating if you knew people were still absent. And if you woke up tomorrow and your toe, or ear, or elbow was missing, you wouldn’t shrug it off. The same is true with the church. Part of being a New Testament Christian is living life in community with your local church.

While we cannot know everyone in the universal church, and we can’t know everyone equally well in the local church, the New Testament leads us to see that it should remain a goal to have a growing knowledge of the members in our church. Having two worship services makes this difficult. And this leads us to the third point concerning regular assembly of the whole church

The Modern Amnesia of Ekklesia.

If knowing every member in the church seems daunting, burdensome, or impossible (as it is in some mega-churches), I would suggest we are shaped more by modern conceptions of church than the biblical vision for church family life. As we gather on Sundays, it is right for us be able to make a distinction between who our fellow church members are, and who is visiting with us. As we gather, our orientation is not only vertical in our worship of God, but it is also horizontal as we come to know, love, and serve one another. Part of this does unfold in smaller gatherings, such as in our Community Groups and these groups are important for member care. However, those smaller groups are not the church, i.e., the assembly of our local church.

We won’t take communion in such venues, nor baptize members at a youth retreat, or practice church discipline in a Community Group. Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and church discipline are for the church as God’s assembled people. And when Christians attempt to perform the church ordinances in spaces that do not make up the local church, they are moving against the grain of the New Testament, and neglecting Paul’s admonition to gather together for such things.

Again, while modern (mis)expressions of the church are legion, the New Testament use of *ekklesia* (church) always carries the idea of an assembly. Therefore, a church is a church because it “churches” (i.e., it assembles). As we have repeated for the last year, a church that doesn’t church, can’t continue to be a church. And similarly, a church that has multiple gatherings, not to mention multiple campuses, functions as multiple churches.

The New Testament reality of church is one that is formed by the gospel, constituted by the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and maintained by the regular assembly of God’s people each Lord’s Day. Within that framework, there is incredible liberty to order the church as needed, but one of the anchoring truths that must remain is that local churches assemble together as one. Not only does this single gathering display the truth that the church is one body, not many; but it also enables members to know one another and grow with one another.

I realize that for many, such an approach to church seems foreign, perhaps even overwhelming. But consider where such impressions come from? Do they arise from biblical theology of the church, or from church experiences that were at odds with the New Testament church? The point of this blogpost is to say that Scripture gives us a model for how we should gather, and the biblical norm is for churches to assemble in a single gathering each Lord’s Day.

Two Services: A Look Back at OBC’s History

If the biblical pattern is for one body to assemble in one gathering, why does OBC have two services?

Knowing a little history of our church might be helpful. After its founding in 1995, OBC gathered at multiple schools for the first ten years. As membership grew, the church sought a place to build a church facility to provide a stable place for ministry. In God’s providence, even though land prices were sky-rocketing in our area, a generous seller let us purchase our current land for the same price that the seller had purchased it for in the 1980s.

Challenges arose after the land was purchased. Building costs increased significantly, and the size of our land parcel restricted the size of the sanctuary. In addition to this, the Lord gave numerical growth, and as a result, the new building was too small to hold one worship service. OBC has held two worship services since it moved into our current building in 2005.

In more recent years, the Lord has been teaching us the priority of church life, including the goodness of assembly as one body of believers. As mentioned in last week’s blog, this is a theological reason for our going outside this summer. We believe that one gathering better expresses our belief in the unity of the local church, and practically, we see it as a seasonal way to grow fellowship in ways that are not possible when we divide our assembly into two services during the school year. And this leads to a final point of prayer for ongoing faithfulness and stewardship.

Three Prayer Requests: Gathering This Summer and Beyond

As we prepare to go outside this Sunday, May 16, it is our prayer that God would strengthen our fellowship and our experience of church unity. We recognize and have heard that those in first service often do not know those in second service, and vice versa. While Sunday School, Tuesday nights, Community Groups, and other ministry events help, it will never be the same as one service. Therefore, we look forward to having one service. And we encourage you to

take the opportunity to meet new members and visitors and to make use of the extended fellowship time between worship and Sunday School.

A second prayer request is that our one assembly would better testify to the truth that we are one people and even more that we serve one God. If God is one, it only fits that his people are one too. Paul lists in Ephesians 4 the unity of God—Father, Son, and Spirit—as the source of his people’s unity (one faith, one baptism, etc.). By assembling as one, we display our shared faith in Christ. And in so doing, we are praying that others would come to know Christ and even join our body of believers. So we are praying for God to strengthen our fellowship and that our unified gathering would be a public testimony that Jesus is Lord.

Third, we are praying for God to provide a place where we might gather as one. This summer that looks like our parking lot. But if you saw the number who joined on Easter Sunday, and if you have seen the new member board recently, it is possible—if the Lord would ordain—that soon our indoor seating would not accommodate two services, let alone help us gather as one. With such a possibility on the horizon, we need to pray that God would give us wisdom and a place that he would provide so that we can gather as one body.

We recognize that our practice of multiple services is inconsistent with our convictions. And though, we do not believe that inconsistency is sin, we believe that it is not best, nor wise to be out of alignment with Scripture’s instruction. [\[1\]](#) For that reason, we are asking you to pray with us for a place to be able to gather as one body.

At the same time, not everyone may have the same immediate conviction about gathering in one service. The elders of OBC are persuaded from Scripture that one assembly is God’s good design, and that biblical conviction is what is driving our leadership. Even so, we should all agree about two things: (1) the Lord has added many to our number in the last year with many new visitors coming every week and (2) we are not willing to add a third service. Therefore, for all the biblical and practical reasons outlined here, we ask you to join us in prayer.

Our goal is not to be a mega-church. That would actually go against our stated commitment to be a *family* of believers centered on the gospel and a church that longs to participate in seeing other churches planted. Someday we will revisit the idea of church planting. But for now, our biblical convictions lead us to consider how we can be one family of faith who bears witness to our one Lord by our one assembly.

This blogpost closes not with a call to action or an impending plan, but it closes with a reminder of why gathering in one service matters, why we believe the Bible calls local churches to assemble as one body on the Lord’s Day, and why we are praying for the Lord’s ongoing direction and provision.

We are thankful to God for the body he has and is assembling at OBC. Your elders long to be good stewards of the flock he has sent to us, and we look forward to seeing you outside this summer, even as we trust the Lord for our daily bread and our future steps.

[\[1\]](#) If the difference between sin and prudence is unclear at this point, let me offer another analogy from church life. Scripture clearly teaches that New Testament churches should have a plurality of elders (see e.g., Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). This is the ideal. However, if a church only has one qualified elder (or even no qualified elders), this is not immediately a sin, but

rather a matter of prayer and pursuit. The single pastor should pray for laborers and disciple men who could become elders. Similarly, the church with no qualified elders should not install unqualified elders, but should pray for God to raise up elder-qualified men. With church gathering, the situation is similar: it is not a sin to have multiple services, but it is not best. And if our biblical convictions are moving toward a single assembly, it would be sin to do nothing about it. And so we should pray to that end.