



HOW THE GOSPEL SHAPES OUR GATHERING: TWELVE AIMS

Heritage Bible Church
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Since the early days of the church, local churches have gathered on a specific day, “the first day of the week” (Acts 20:7). That’s the day Jesus rose from the dead (Lk. 24:1). The Apostle John called it, “the Lord’s Day” (Rev. 1:10). Here’s what this means: the gospel of the risen Lord Jesus is not just the reason we come together, but the very occasion on which we gather. Jesus ascended to heaven then to assemble a people. That’s one way in which the gospel shapes the church’s gathering.

The question of how the good news shapes our Lord’s Day gathering deserves careful reflection. In the first place, we spend an abundance of time doing this together. More importantly, for all the weekly, monthly, and annual patterns prescribed under the old covenant, this is our one new covenant family routine—nothing less than God’s sovereign plan to assemble his new covenant worshiping community (Jn. 4:23). Yet our gatherings are not only for the sake of his name, but for our good. The gospel shapes our gatherings, and our gatherings shape us. For these reasons and more, the first day of the week is of first priority.

What follows are reflections on how the gospel shapes our gatherings. Here in these reflections are our hopes and—so we pray—God’s intentions for how we go about our Lord’s Day services at Heritage. These don’t meddle much with things like logistics or instruments, but they do collect our best biblical wisdom for any season and most decisions. They overlap and interlock. They reflect where we are, and at times how we’re growing. Here is what’s important to us, what

we want to teach, how we want to train, and what we want to hand down. Twelve is the number for the people of God, so here are *twelve aims* for our Lord's Day gatherings.

1. We want our Lord's Day gathering to fulfill God's vertical and horizontal purposes for bringing us together.

It's *the Lord's Day* and so we desire for our gathering to reflect his purposes for it. Here is his highest purpose: to magnify his own glory—that is, that he may be worshiped, valued, and treasured above all things (Ps. 34:3). We are born worshipers and born sinners who worship the wrong things, trading the glory of our Creator for the creation (Ro. 1:23). In Christ, the God who is jealous for his own glory redeemed us to the praise of the *apex* of his glory: his glorious grace (Isa. 48:11; Eph. 1:6, 12, 14). God seeks his glory in every part and moment of our lives, and yet he receives a special and greater glory in the coming together of local churches, God's heavenly worshiping *assemblies* on earth (Ro. 12:1–2; 1Cor. 10:31; Heb. 12:22–24). The old covenant community came to the temple to worship; in Christ, we are God's temple, the very place of new covenant worship (Eph. 2:19–22; 1Pet. 2:4–10; Jn. 4:24). Individually we are “living stones,” but together we are “being built up into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices” (1Pet. 2:5). God's glory is his vertical purpose for bringing us together.

But there are horizontal purposes he has in mind for us as well. In fact, this matter of edification is the New Testament's dominant vocabulary for our Lord's Day gatherings. God's glory is manifest when we gather to serve one another with our gifts, to instruct one another with the Word, to stir one another up to love and good works, and to encourage one another until Christ comes (Col. 3:16; 1Cor. 12:4–6; 14:26; Heb. 10:24–25). Our gathering is also a means of spreading God's glory broader in the world. Our unity and love is only theoretical when we're apart. When we come together in unity and love, the Father shows the world that he loves and sent the Son (1Cor. 14:23–25; Jn. 13:35; 17:20–23). These purposes emerge in various ways in the aims that follow.

2. We want our gatherings to be formed and filled by the Word of God.

God's name and his Word can't be pulled apart: “for you have exalted above all things your name and your word” (Ps. 138:2). Adam did not trust God's Word to guide his worship, but in Christ we magnify God's worth by trusting his Word to guide our worship. *Word-formed* worship trusts God's means for God's work. We trust God's Word by devoting ourselves to the ordinary elements of praying, singing, reading, the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper, and the Word preached (1Tim. 2:1, 8; Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16; 1Tim. 4:13; 1Cor. 11:23–26; 2Tim. 4:2). We also weave these things together to tell the story of the gospel. We typically do this with a

progression, however subtle, from a call to worship and joyful praise, to confession and assurance, to prayer for the Word, preaching, and conclude with thankful response and a benediction. While the story of the world pulls us away from God and his grace, we want the story of our meetings to unfold and enfold us in God's gospel and grace.

The Word does more than shape our services; it is the very substance of our gathering. *Word-filled* worship means we fill our service with a certain content—the Scriptures, and the Word of the gospel in particular. This includes everything the Lord Jesus does for us, from his saving work, to his intercession right now, to his future return. It includes everything our Lord purchased for us: adoption, forgiveness, redemption—indeed every spiritual blessing (Eph. 1:3–14). For all these reasons, we can't help but sing doctrinally rich songs and pray prayers infused with the gospel. It's why we preach sermons through books of the Bible and submit the shape and aim of our sermons to the shape and aim of the text at hand. We want to hear from *him*. By forming and filling our worship by the Word, God forms and fills us with himself.

3. We want our gatherings to *unfold with movements of revelation and response.*

Because we are raised with Christ, when God reveals himself to us in his Word, we can respond to him as we should. We are not dead to him, but we are alive. When we see him as he is, we are not destroyed but transformed (2Cor. 3:18). In the Scriptures, God reveals himself in all of his Triune glory (2Cor. 13:14). This is why we gather in the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit—the Father set his love on us from eternity and planned for our redemption; Christ's blood and righteousness makes us acceptable to a holy God; and the Spirit actively draws, convicts, gives life, and fills us with himself. In the Word, God reveals his transcendence; that is, he is "holy, holy, holy" (Isa. 6:1–3; Rev. 4:8). He knows all, he is everywhere, and he orders all things. He also reveals his immanence, that is, his nearness. Incredibly, the God who "inhabits eternity," is pleased to dwell "with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit" (Isa. 57:15). He does not reveal himself to us completely—these are but a flicker of his infinite perfections—but he does reveal himself truly, and because of the gospel that is good news.

When God speaks, his people respond to him. On our best days, we respond to God in a way that reflects back to him his own greatness: "Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised" (Ps. 48:1). Praise is God's highest due, but it is hardly our only proper response. We respond to all of God's perfections, from all of our circumstances, and with all of our being: we sing for joy and lament our sadness; we confess our sins and rejoice in our assurance; we rest in him and yet long for the completion of his plans; we come in silence and contemplation and with loud celebration (Ps. 46:10; 150); we tremble at his severity and take comfort in his kindness (Ro. 11:22); we bow before him, and we raise and clap our hands (Ps. 95:6; 28:2; 47:1); we are "grateful

for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken,” and at the same time we approach him “with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire” (Heb. 12:28, 29).

4. We want our gatherings to be *individually meaningful and intentionally congregational*.

Jesus died for people—individual people. He had each of us on his mind as he suffered so that each of us can say, he died for *me* (1Tim. 1:14, 15); the Father rejoices before the angels over every sinner that repents (Lk. 15:10); and each of us can say, “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want” (Ps. 23:1). God comes to us personally and we come to him personally. But it is also true that Jesus purchased for himself *a people*, his one bride (Tit. 2:14; Rev. 2:9). For that reason, we want our gatherings to be meaningful for every individual, and for every individual to find their meaning within the context of the family of God. For, it is ultimately within the context of the local church that the Word of Christ dwells richly in his people: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” (Col. 3:16; cf. Eph. 5:18–21). We gather to encounter the living God through his Word *and* to engage the people of God around his Word.

This is why every element of our gathering is planned with the congregation’s participation in view. When someone prays, everyone prays, and *we* pray together. When we sing, everyone sings, and *we* sing together—both to God and to one another. Song leaders are jealous to promote the congregation’s voice—the most important instrument in the room. Preachers don’t just preach the Bible, but preach *to* the people, and everyone actively listens. The ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper are individual acts, yet they are no less our acts together as a church of members covenanted together. In all these things, our love and unity as a local church is the Father’s answer to Jesus’ prayer, “that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you” (Jn. 17:20, 21).

5. We want our gatherings to *renew our minds and raise our affections*.

Our gatherings do not aim for only intellectual understanding or for emotional experience. We intend to engage our heads and our hearts. The Colossian believers first “heard,” and then “understood the grace of God in truth” which they had “learned,” only then to grow in the “knowledge of God” (Col. 1:5–7, 10). The Ephesian believers were to “be renewed in the spirit of [their] minds” by what they “learned [concerning] Christ” (Eph. 4:24). All proper worship begins with proper knowledge (Jn. 4:22). Our Bibles are filled with teaching, with reasoning, and with arguments. Our gatherings must be too.

But, of course, this *can't* be where it stops, for Jesus came for more than our minds: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (Matt. 22:37). Therefore, we are not afraid of emotions. We value light and heat, head and heart. We want our gatherings to be marked by wholehearted and heartfelt praise to God. In fact, we want to raise our affections for Jesus as high as they can be raised, given that they are being stirred up with the truth and person of Jesus. May it never be said of us, “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me,” but rather, this people worships “with thankfulness in [their] hearts to God” (Matt. 15:7; Col. 3:16).

6. We want our gatherings to be *pastorally planned and spiritually free.*

Our gatherings require a certain kind of planning. Our meeting is a ministry of the Word, its design a theological task, and the church's essential diet of truth. For this reason, our approach to the design and leadership of our services is not personality or production or performance, but pastoring. Every member of the church is responsible for her faithfulness to the gospel (Gal. 6:1), and yet pastors are responsible to lead the church into faithfulness in truth (Col. 2:1-3; Tit. 1:9; 2:1). They prepare as workmen, not showmen (2Tim. 2:15). This doesn't mean that all the elders are equally involved, or that it is only elders who may be involved in the service's planning and day-of leadership. Rather, it is through the oversight and equipping of the church's elders/undershepherds, Jesus shepherds us all (Jn. 21:17; 1Pet. 5:1-4).

Pastorally laid plans serve the Spirit's free work, but we must not think that our plans are inspired. If the Spirit does not work, then nothing of spiritual significance will take place. It is the Spirit of Christ alone who nourishes us with sound doctrine, equips us with gifts for service, guards us from false teaching, comforts us with the balm of Scripture, warns us against apostasy, and knits our hearts together in love. Larger gatherings will require greater care in preparation if all things will be done “decently and in order” (1Cor. 14:40; cf. 14:23, 26). That's the Spirit's plan. Nevertheless, we want not only to be comfortable with unplanned moments, but to plan on them (1Cor. 14:39). Those are the Spirit's plan too. Part of this for a larger church means encouraging and fostering all kinds of meaningful interactions leading to and flowing from the gathering itself.

7. We want our gatherings to foster a community that is *historically rooted and hungry for God's ongoing work.*

Our services should feel both old and new, rooted and relevant. Our services are historic in that they are built with and around the ancient Scriptures, but also in our periodic use of creeds and confessions. We also mine the past for the best and singable old songs penned and loved by the

church down the ages. Not only do we have one another for encouragement until the Day, but we walk a well-worn path, surrounded as we go by a great cloud of witnesses (Heb. 10:25; 11:1–12:1). We want our services to situate us within that larger and longer family.

But our God is not done working in the world, and so we gather to pursue and celebrate the work of God that continues today. We want this to be apparent in our preaching, for God’s unchanging Word is living and active (Heb. 4:12). Our prayers of thanksgiving should commend what God has done in the distant past, but also in this past week. Our humble petitions call on him to do it over and again. Our old songs remind us that God worked in the generations before us, and our new songs remind us that he’s at work today among us (Ps. 40:3). That’s what Paul meant when he told us to sing, “psalms and hymns and *spiritual songs*” (Col. 3:16, emphasis added). With a variety that includes newer songs, we will curate the best texts by modern writers, with an ear for tunes written *for the church*.

8. We want our gatherings to adorn the Word of God with undistracting excellence.

There are many things Scripture does not speak to for new covenant worship—instruments, volume levels, or colors on the wall. We don’t want to make more of these than we should. But neither do we want to make less of them than God would have (1Tim. 4:4). We believe that music is God’s gift. By highlighting truth, music impresses that truth on our hearts (Col 3:16). By it we also express that truth, making melody in our hearts to God (Eph. 5:19). For large gatherings, technology helps us transmit the Word with focus, intimacy, and sincerity. A plate holds out a meal and these hold out the Word.

Adorning the Word requires excellence that avoids distraction. Let us only do what we can do well, and then let us do that as well as we can. We will avoid shoddy leadership. Missed notes and missed cues mean we miss the beauty of truth. We will invest in the right people, plans, and gear to that end (Ex. 31:1–5; Ps. 33:3). We will also avoid showy leadership—the kind of excessive refinement or creativity that draws attention away from the proper center of our attention. Our artistry should be natural and our technology should be invisible. Wisdom is needed to know how this looks, but we know what it sounds like: our people talking not so much about our great skill (or our great blunders!), but about God’s great grace.

9. We want our gatherings to be culturally anchored and expansive.

Around Jesus’ throne will be men and women from every tribe and language and nation, and their cultures will color our heavenly experience (Rev. 5:9–14; 21:24–26). A look back to our story helps us look to that day. At Babel we brought our uniformity of culture to make for ourselves a

great name (Gen. 11:4). At Pentecost God united men and women from diverse cultures for the sake of his (Acts 2). Through Israel he set apart one nation to be his special people, marked out by her relationship to God, but also distinct through a barrier, the law, with its rules and regulations. Through this ethnically, nationally, and culturally uniform people, God planned to send his Messiah. Through the cross, our mighty Christ broke down the barrier of the law to create one new humanity, an international people made of Jew and Gentile (Eph. 2:14–16). The result is not a new uniformity, but a Spirit-wrought *unity in diversity*—the new distinctive marker of God’s new people. Today, God’s manifold wisdom is seen in his *one* manifold people, the church (Eph. 3:8–10).

What does this mean for our gatherings? It means that our meetings are centered on a Person whose redeeming love is expansive and far reaching. His love defines us, not our style of music or dress, or the like. For this reason, while we are happy for our gatherings to be culturally anchored, to be familiar, to feel like *us* and *our* home—we want that for foreign peoples too—we also want our gatherings to stretch us. We want help from various tunes and genres to respond to God’s manifold glory and grace. We want our neighbors to feel at home in all the appropriate ways, to know Jesus comes to all of us (1Cor. 9:20–22). We also desire to be ready for heaven. We know this takes work, and we gladly take it on. Peter had to be told three times, “kill and eat,” and the church at Rome had to be told to “welcome one another” (Acts 10:13–16; Ro. 15:7). Here’s what *we’re* working for: to be who we are as genuinely as we know how; to hold lightly to our subjective preferences in order to highlight the objective beauty of the gospel; and to boast in the only source of true spiritual power and glory: Jesus’ great name.

10. We want our gatherings to draw outsiders to Christ and our attention to the outermost parts of the earth.

Our gatherings involve the worship of God; they also advance it. We are a city on a hill, with our gatherings the hot spot of Jesus’ light and life in us (Matt. 5:16). Light attracts and light exposes. When the Apostle Paul wrote the church at Corinth about her gatherings, he gave consideration to outsiders drawn to her light. What was desire? That they would be “convicted by all” and respond by falling on their face in worship declaring, “God is really among you” (1Cor. 14:24–25). This is what we want to happen. For that reason, we want to demonstrate hospitality in Jesus’ name. A culture of hospitality among our members is a biblical given, but because we’re a large congregation this also means thoughtfully laid plans for Sunday mornings. From the website to parking, from signage to seating, from how we talk about Christ to how we talk about our church—in all this we want to be accessible, inviting, and clarifying in all the appropriate ways. We don’t just want outsiders to join us again, but to join us in Christ and in membership.

God's worship is advanced in yet another way: through our ever-expanding global vision of God's work for his name. The Apostle Paul imparted to his churches an expansive vision of the gospel's work all around us: "indeed in the whole world [the gospel] is bearing fruit and increasing—as it also does among [us]" (Col. 1:3–6). What we see happening in our own church actually points us outside ourselves. For this reason, we pray to God, and we pray for the nations. We pray for governments and for peace to preach here and abroad (1Tim. 2:1–5). We praise God's name, and we sing *for* the praise of his name, just as the saints who cherish him have always done: "May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, that your way may be known on earth ... Let the nations be glad and sing for joy ... Let all the peoples praise you!" (Ps. 67:1–5). We bring reports of what God is doing among the nations (Acts 15:12; 21:19), and we sing for the day when we will all sing together (Rev. 5:9–14).

11. We want our gatherings to *embolden us and humble us.*

How can believers live without fear of God's judgment, of death, and the Devil's tyranny? How can believers live without fear of the world's condemnation, even threats to our very lives? The answer is one: by gathering each Lord's Day. Supernatural unflinching boldness is one fruit of a faithful gathering. By the blood of our great high priest, "we have confidence to enter the holy places," which does not depend on us, but on faith (Heb. 10:19; Eph. 3:12). We are bold in God's presence, knowing he welcomes us. We are also bold in an often-unwelcoming world. After their arrest, Peter and John gathered the church: "And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness" (Acts 4:31; cf. Phil. 1:14). Their boldness "astonished" authorities who recognized that they "had been with Jesus" (Acts 4:13). When we meet on the Lord's day, we meet with Jesus, and he makes us ready for whatever we meet when we leave.

We are bold, but no less humble. We come to him because he came to us; we come together because he came for us. We draw near "with confidence" to God because we know that he gives what we desperately need: "grace to help in time of need" (Heb. 4:16). Naturally, then, walking in this gospel means living "with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:2–3). We may have great differences, but we get along great because of the calling to which we have been called, and because of Christ's own humility which compels us to count others more significant than ourselves (Eph. 3:1; Phil. 2:3). Of what value is humility before God in an unwelcoming world? Peter tells us: "humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you" (1Pet. 5:6).

12. We want our gatherings to stir us to rest in Christ and not rest until he returns.

What day is it? That may be the most important question when it comes to the Lord's Day. Sometimes Sunday is called the Sabbath, or a *day of rest*. That is not quite right. The Lord's Day is when we celebrate the arrival of Sabbath rest for all who trust in Jesus. Israel kept the Sabbath, a weekly seventh-day to stop working and trust God (Ex. 20:8–11; 31:12–17). That day pointed back to the creation, when on the seventh day God rested, entering into the enjoyment of his relationship with us (Gen. 2:2–3). It also pointed forward to the day when God's people would be at rest with him in the land of promise. Here's why Sunday isn't the Sabbath: in Jesus, that Day has come. Jesus says to us all, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). On the Lord's Day we gather as those who have entered into that rest, and as those who need to remember where our true rest is (Heb. 4:8–10).

Rest has *already* come, but we know that Jesus' work is *not yet* complete. We feel this *already/not yet* tension in our bodies, in our troubles, and on Sundays when our heart isn't in it—all the more reason we should come together. Sundays do not erase our problems but help us hang onto the one who will. We remember that we have been redeemed, and yet we await the redemption of our bodies (Ro. 8:23). We cry out, "Abba Father!", and yet we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons (Ro. 8:15; 23). We remind one another that we are new creations in Christ, and yet we await a new creation when all will be right (2Cor. 5:17; 2Pet. 3:13). We are content in Christ, and yet we wait for him with a holy-discontent with life as it is (Phil. 4:11). We come together because of his grace, and we come for grace to trust him more. We have found rest in Christ, yes, but we gather to say to one another over and over again, "strive to enter that rest" (Heb. 4:11). By doing so, our meetings not only give us Jesus; they get us home to him. Nowhere better is this tasted than in our regular meal of the Lord's table. There, we eat and drink with him, and look to the day when he will eat and drink *anew* with us in his Father's kingdom (Matt. 26:26–28).