

Going to Church

SPEAKER Matt Ryniker

DATE Sunday, May 5, 2024

PASSAGES Hebrews 10; Acts 2; Ephesians 5; 1 Corinthians 14; 1 Peter 4

MESSAGE Begins at 0:00:00 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

Hebrews does not hand the church a service order. It hands out reasons — hold fast the confession, stir one another up, draw near with confidence — and every one of them points away from what you get and toward what the body gets. Look past the what and stare hard at the why.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ Every branch of the church tells itself the same story: the early church was monolithic, its liturgy was consistent and discernible, and ours happens to match. The first two claims are simply false.
- ◆ What the early church actually had was liturgical chaos around a fixed center. Bread and wine or a full meal, dunked or poured, prayers led by anyone — the how varied wildly. That it was done in Jesus' name did not.
- ◆ Americans invented the disco ball. We did not invent immaturity. Passive congregations are at least as old as Hebrews; self-serving preachers are at least as old as Philippians.
- ◆ “Don't neglect to meet together” is a yes and a no. Yes to fellowship, no to a box you check by sitting in a room.
- ◆ Scripture's gathering lists are almost entirely other-directed: upbuilding, encouragement, consolation, conviction, serving with the strength God supplies.
- ◆ A free liturgy is only free if you actually do the things scripture describes. Otherwise you have built a new liturgy and gotten uptight about it.
- ◆ Passive attendance is authentically boring, and the boredom is a symptom. People stay committed when they are pouring out, not when they are auditing what they got.

► 1:09:22

Matt opened by conceding that this was, in his own estimation, “an okay sermon,” and that he should probably at least start it. What followed was a careful dismantling of the way most of us argue about church — and a passage that answers a question we mostly skip.

First, an unusual invitation

► 1:09:40

A rabbi from an Austin synagogue reached out to Matt because his congregation feels alone and vulnerable as tensions over Israel and Palestine spill into American life. The two have already met. The plan is deliberately vague — some evening where anyone can come ask a rabbi anything, then the same in reverse, maybe bowling after that — because, as Matt put it, “the goal is relationship, which is why I can't tell you what it'll look like long term.” The synagogue chose Hope because of its reputation for being willing to do wild stuff.

The story every church tells about itself

► 1:12:42

Matt used the word propaganda, and not entirely negatively. Every tradition claims the early church was a single unchanging thing, that its liturgy is discernible from this distance, and that — conveniently — ours is basically it. He aimed the critique at his own Protestant side, and the reason he knows nobody is doing what they did is that the first two claims are wrong on their face.

► 1:14:22

Jesus' earliest followers came from everywhere — Medes, Parthians, Greeks, Romans, Jews, Africans — and when three thousand were added in a day, they took the gospel home with them. Study what happened next and you find what Matt called liturgical chaos, with consistency about the things that mattered. Some celebrated the Lord's Supper with a little bread and wine, some with an enormous meal. Baptism came fast or slow, by immersion or by pouring. Prayers were led by different people for different lengths in different ways. But they broke bread, they baptized, they prayed, and they did it in his name — because “do this in remembrance of me” never specified the menu.

We did not invent immaturity

► 1:16:30

American Christians are fond of diagnosing the American way of doing church. Matt's correction: anything touching the human heart — temptation, vanity, fallenness — turns up wherever you find people. “We may have invented fog machines,” he offered, before two people texted him mid-sermon that the fog machine is German. He took it hard, then recovered when someone texted that the disco ball is ours. The serious point stands: you can have a passive congregation and a performing minister with no technology whatsoever. Passive congregations are at least as old as Hebrews, and preachers with mixed motives are as old as Philippians.

The passage, read for its purpose statements

► 1:19:33

“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, through his flesh... let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith... Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another.”

HEBREWS 10:19–25 ↗

This is where people plant the flag: *see, it says go to church*. Yes and no. The yes is real — there is a strong call not to neglect fellowship. The no is the phrase itself, which is ambiguous enough that for many it means a box checked passively. Read for goals instead and the passage gives you several: confidence in the blood of Jesus, drawing near in full assurance, holding the confession without wavering, stirring one another toward love and good works, meeting for the strengthening of the body.

What the rest of the New Testament says we do when we gather

► 1:23:11

Matt walked a list, and Hope’s long-standing rally cry came first — the apostles’ teaching, the fellowship, the breaking of bread and the prayers — noting again that it says nothing about how long, how often, or who leads.

“Be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.”

EPHESIANS 5:18–21 ↗

► 1:25:26

Then the chapter that is explicitly about a church meeting, where the purpose statements come three to a verse:

“The one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation... The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church.”

1 CORINTHIANS 14:3 ↗

Notice the direction of travel. Paul assumes people arrive carrying something — “each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation” — and rules the whole thing with one sentence: let all things be done for building up. Even the outsider walking in and being convicted counts as fruit you would hope for from a gathering of saints. And prophecy goes one at a time, with the others weighing what is said, “so that all may learn and all be encouraged.”

The negative examples are just as instructive. Corinth turned the Lord’s Supper into everybody’s own dinner:

“When you come together, it is not the Lord’s supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk... Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?”

1 CORINTHIANS 11:20–22 ↗

And earlier, the reason they could not handle solid food was jealousy and strife — infant dependence dressed up as spirituality. Peter closes the loop:

“As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies — in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ.”

1 PETER 4:10–11 ↗

A free liturgy is only free if you use it

► 1:31:49

Hope’s Sundays do not have to run song set, announcements, sermon. They can be punctuated by testimony, by a word, by whatever the room brings. Matt’s warning was pointed: what is the use of a

free liturgy if you never engage the things scripture actually outlines? “Then you have actually just developed a new liturgy that you’re then uptight about, but you say it’s free.”

► 1:32:21

He punctured one more piece of nostalgia on the way past. The early church did not always meet in cozy living rooms — that math does not work with thousands of believers per city. Sometimes it was a house that seats fifteen; sometimes a wealthy acquaintance’s courtyard that could hold all of Hope Chapel and then some. Sometimes a forest, a riverbank, a cave, a rented ground-floor space in a Roman apartment block, a synagogue. The venue moved. The purpose did not.

Three ways of skipping, ranked

► 1:33:14

Matt started with the least irrational: *I will do an outreach during that time instead*. Hold it against the list. Does an outreach encourage the saints, build up the church, deliver a lesson or a hymn to the body? Possibly, depending how you do it. Most likely not. So do it — and gather too.

► 1:34:25

Spicier: *I will stay home and have a quiet time, because that is what fills me up*. Every reason given for gathering concerns someone else being served. The only place scripture sets a precedent for focusing chiefly on your own filling is inside a correction.

► 1:36:13

Spiciest: *the live stream is the same, because I sing along, get fed and stay caught up*. Same test, same result. Underneath all three, Matt said, is not a bad argument but a missing motivation — and he was candid that this is his opinion, not a ruling. “I think we as people are the least likely to be motivated to fellowship with the saints when our attitude is, how can I be served by them.” Going to church passively is authentically boring, and he said so as the preacher.

“It is more blessed to give than to receive” turns out to describe how commitment actually works.

► 1:36:56

Giving sacrificially also quietly kills judgmentalism, the way a potluck does. “It’s weird to go to a potluck and just be like, ah, that’s overcooked, that’s underdone. You’re like — well, what’d you bring?”

The exceptions, and the giveaway

► 1:37:30

Some people arrive chewed up and spit out by the world or by another church, and they need to heal and receive. Some are sick and cannot come — and, Matt noted, they are the first to say a stream is not the same. He would rather send a prayer team to your house than send you a link; the teams are ready, or nearly. There will be seasons of mostly receiving. It is a dead giveaway that something is wrong if you stay there. He also named the trope every pastor hears: *I attended for years, I dropped out, nobody called me*. That would genuinely be shocking if you had been mentoring, being mentored, and serving on a team. Sitting anonymously in a row and then vanishing is the in-person version of the thing he had just been needling about the stream.

What the prize actually is

► 1:40:39

Strength and encouragement for your sake. A greater ability, because you are engaged and committed, to hold fast the confession with full assurance — which is exactly where Hebrews was driving. “Not only is self-focus super boring, it’s also not very satisfying,” Matt said. “We don’t feed ourselves very well by giving ourselves ourselves. That’s a bad meal, and you know it. I’ve been there.”

► 1:41:24

He offered the practical version. Isolation pulls the eyes down, and everything in the world is a moving walkway away from Christ. Often you do not know what encouragement you need until someone else operating in their gift lands it on you. He was walking in discouragement one day when Marty came up with a prophetic word: “I didn’t even know how much I needed that. But I needed that.” The prize is having your eyes drawn back up, so that we feast on his flesh and drink his blood and walk in the abundant life he keeps offering. That is the why.

FOR FURTHER STUDY**SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE**

- Acts 2:41
- Luke 22:19
- Philippians 1:15–17
- Hebrews 10:19–25
- Acts 2:42
- Ephesians 5:18–21
- 1 Corinthians 14:3
- 1 Corinthians 14:26
- 1 Corinthians 14:24–25
- 1 Corinthians 14:29–31
- 1 Corinthians 11:20–22
- 1 Corinthians 3:1–3
- 1 Peter 4:10–11
- Acts 20:35
- John 6:55–56

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. Which piece of church propaganda have you believed — that your tradition's way of gathering is the original one? What would change if it is not?
2. Matt said to look past the what and stare hard at the why. If someone asked why you came to church last Sunday, what would you honestly answer?
3. Of the gathering's purposes — upbuilding, encouragement, consolation, conviction, holding the confession together — which one has someone here given you recently, and did you tell them?
4. Where do you tend to land on the three ways of skipping: outreach instead, quiet time instead, or the stream is the same? What is underneath it for you?
5. What is one thing you could bring to this body this week rather than come to collect — a hymn, a lesson, a word, a meal, an hour of service?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Matt Ryniker is Hope Chapel's senior pastor — his own description of the job — and reports to the church's governing board, who he cheerfully calls his boss. He and his wife Mandy have been held up from Hope's own pulpit as an example to the congregation. He spent a stretch of his working life as a public school teacher, and he still teaches the parent dedication classes where families commit to raising their children to follow Jesus — a theme that runs straight into this message.

Watch the full message:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=blHRcKQNVs&t=0s>

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.