

First Christian Church (Lawrence, KS)
Dr. Barry M. Foster
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Stewardship and Church Membership
Why We Gather

Acts 1:1-14 (NIV)

In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach 2 until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. 3 After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. 4 On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. 5 For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”

6 Then they gathered around him and asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

7 He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. 8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

9 After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

10 They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. 11 “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”

12 Then the apostles returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day’s walk from the city. 13 When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. 14 They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.

Acts 2:1-4 (NIV)

2 When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. 2 Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. 3 They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

Acts 2:14-47 (NIV)

14 Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: “Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. 15 These people are not drunk, as you suppose. It’s only nine in the morning! 16 No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: 17 “‘In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. 18 Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. 19 I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. 20 The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. 21 And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ 22 “Fellow Israelites, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. 23 This man was handed over to you by God’s deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. 24 But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. 25 David said about him:

“‘I saw the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken. 26 Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest in hope, 27 because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, you will not let your holy one see decay. 28 You have made known to me the paths of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence.’

29 “Fellow Israelites, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day. 30 But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. 31 Seeing what was to come, he spoke of the

resurrection of the Messiah, that he was not abandoned to the realm of the dead, nor did his body see decay. 32 God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it. 33 Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear. 34 For David did not ascend to heaven, and yet he said,

“The Lord said to my Lord: “Sit at my right hand 35 until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.””

36 “Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.”

37 When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”

38 Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

40 With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” 41 Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

42 They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. 43 Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. 44 All the believers were together and had everything in common. 45 They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. 46 Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, 47 praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

[Slide 1] *Opening*

Good morning church! Every year we take a few weeks to intentionally focus on stewardship and church membership. Our mission statement says that “*First Christian exists to make disciples of Jesus.*” We fulfill that mission through our personal lives and our shared ministry as we “Gather,” “Grow,” and “Go.” Today we’re going to look at the first of these three words: “Gather.” We’ll start by asking a question: “*Why do we gather?*”

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The title of my sermon today, “Why We Gather,” could, of course, be taken a couple of different ways. If we think of that phrase by itself, we think about people—us—coming together. If we think of the phrase in connection with the picture on the slide, we think instead about stuff that we collect and bring together, such as harvested wheat.

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Both of those ideas are appropriate for us as we begin to think about stewardship—because stewardship is not just about money. We don’t take these weeks to focus on stewardship each year only because it’s time to start planning for our church’s annual budget. The two are obviously connected, and our need to plan wisely, prudently, and responsibly gives us a time frame for determining when we want to focus on stewardship. But stewardship is about more than just budgets and planning and thinking about giving. Stewardship is a way of thinking about my life. And if we’re thinking about our lives in terms of stewardship, then everything we do all year long is related to this concept, not just the few weeks in October and November when we address the matter directly.

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But since we have the opportunity to focus on stewardship and our relationship to one another as a church family, let’s look at this point about “gathering.” Let’s start by asking a fairly simple question: “Why do we gather?” By that I mean, “Why does anyone gather—for anything?”

People gather together for lots of different reasons, and those reasons often overlap. That’s not surprising—people are complex creatures, and very few things that we do are done for a solitary reason. But consider why people gather:

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(1) Sometimes people gather because they share an interest in some activity that they like to do. So, for instance, there are people who form or join clubs to look at cars of a particular vintage, or to go birdwatching, or to discuss books they have read. They might gather to look at art, or to practice cooking, or to re-enact Civil War scenarios. They gather with other people because those other people are interested in what they like to do. Beyond that shared affinity for some activity, they might have little or nothing in common at all.

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(2) Sometimes people gather because they share an appreciation for a form of entertainment, or for a particular artist or team. So Royals fans gather to watch the Royals play; they might be gathering at the ballpark, in which case they probably don’t know the vast majority of the people who are there. They might

gather at someone's house to watch the game together, in which case they might all know each other pretty well. But what brings them together at this time is the fact that they all want to watch the team that they support.

The same is true for people who gather together to watch a play or listen to a concert. A week ago, Mary and I and our kids went to the T-Mobile Center in Kansas City to hear Andrea Bocelli perform with the Kansas City Symphony Orchestra and some other performers. We were there with 8-10,000 other people who also wanted to hear this singer.

Whether it is sports fans or music lovers or theater buffs, what draws people together for these occasions is not their love for one another, but their desire to be entertained. They have similar interests and things that they like and so they find themselves at the same place. They aren't there primarily to connect with the people sitting around them, even if they high-five each other after a home run or smile at each other after an amazing solo. They are there to enjoy the time and the artists or athletes who are performing. They just happen to be at the same place as these other people who are gathered there with them.

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(3) Sometimes people gather to advance a cause. They do not come together accidentally, but on purpose. The reason for being together is a shared commitment and a shared purpose. What matters most is not the relationships among those who are gathered, but the cause which has brought them together. The relationships are merely means to a greater end: if the people enjoy those relational connections, that is a bonus, but what actually matters is that the relationships make possible the achievement of their great endeavor. If sacrificing a relationship or a person helps to move the cause forward, then so be it. The cause is all; the mission matters the most.

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(4) There's a similar reason for gathering that is more captivating and more telling. Sometimes people gather for mutual defense against a common threat. Here the reason for being together is necessity. Survival requires that we join as one. But usually, what differentiates this kind of gathering from the previous one is that those who have come together share more than a cause or an ideology. They share a history; their lives overlap with one another. They are already joined in some other way and now must fight against an enemy to maintain their union. Their lives depend upon one another, and their coming together demonstrates the mutual bonds that already exist.

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(5) Sometimes people gather together to achieve a greater good for all; the “all” includes their entire group, but even offers benefits for others who are outside the group, including the possibility of expanding the group so that those who are currently outside might come inside and find even greater benefits. So, for instance, a group of hardy pioneers might join together to found a community. Or a group of citizens in a city or a region might form a cooperative to purchase goods and services at a better price or of a better quality, or to sell their goods and services in such a way that all of their members are benefitted.

[Slide 10] *Crowds and communities*

There are other kinds of gatherings of people, but these five are helpful for comparing and contrasting the reasons why people gather at all. When we look at the various kinds of gatherings of people, there’s a very clear distinction between two main types of gatherings: there are crowds and there are communities.

Crowds come together because of circumstances. They can be people who know each other a little, or even a lot, or they can be completely random. They do not gather together because of their affection for one another but because they have been forced into a particular situation or a certain location. The roads are closed and they are stuck in the diner by the highway; they are trying to escape from a collapsing building or a fire; they are shopping on Black Friday at Target; they are waiting in line to get into the stadium. They did not choose to be a part of this group of people at this time; they are not looking to be connected to those around them. They simply happened to be near those people at the moment.

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Communities, on the other hand, come together regardless of the circumstances. (Or sometimes, the circumstances provide an opportunity for the community to come together.) But what draws the people together is not just an event or a location, but a common purpose, a common basis, a common commitment. And each of those things that draw them together—their purpose, their basis, their commitment—cannot be fulfilled or achieved without being connected to one another. What they share in common—which is the root word from which we derive the term, “community”—is essential for their ongoing existence and identity.

[Slide 12] *Protestant Reformation: Gathered Churches*

As I mentioned at the start of our service, today is Reformation Sunday, when we recognize the anniversary of the event that launched the Protestant Reformation. The Reformation was a very complex development in the history of the Western church, with a multitude of differing aspects and interconnected

trajectories, personalities, beliefs, and so on. It can't be reduced to simple lists of discrete causes and isolated actions.

But it is possible to say some things that were generally true of the Reformation. One of those general truths is that the Protestant Reformation was a reaction against what the Roman Church had become. The Roman Church in the late medieval period was primarily concerned with ritual, political power, and the accumulation of wealth. It was also a church that was not living up to its own moral demands. Instead, the church was characterized by a glut of corrupt and blatantly immoral popes, monks and priests. Furthermore, nearly all of the common people and most of the clergy, were ignorant of the teaching and meaning of Scripture, which had become obscured behind the layers of church laws and a liturgy performed in a language known only by clerics and the educated elite.

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Two of the most widely shared characteristics of the various streams of the Reformation are especially noteworthy, and especially pertinent for us today.

The first is that all of the Reformers shared an emphasis on making the teaching of Scripture the basis for everything that the church believed and did. The Reformers wanted above all to make the Bible and what it said both available to everyone, and to make its teaching plain. Instead of basing the church on the proliferated laws of the church, which only the clerical lawyers could understand, the Reformers translated the Bible into the common language of the people, and opened the word of God to them so that they could know what God expected of them and what God provided for them. They made the gospel clear and plain, so that common, uneducated folk could understand, believe, and find salvation in Christ. They understood the importance of the verse from Isaiah that is printed on the front page of your bulletin today: unlike the fading flowers of human intellect and church decrees, the word of God would stand forever.

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The second characteristic was the recognition that the church was not to be equated with the clergy, as the Roman church dictated. Instead, the church consisted of all of those who were born again, who had confessed Jesus as Lord, been baptized, and held to the truth of Scripture as the authoritative basis for church doctrine and guide for Christian life. Personal experience of salvation and a shared doctrinal faith based on the clear teaching of the Bible replaced obedience to the clergy and partaking of the sacrament of the Eucharist as the marks of the true church.

[Slide 15] *The ekklesia*

These two features of the Protestant Reformation led to a new (or better, a *renewed*) understanding of the church signaled by the Greek word used in the New Testament for the church: the *ekklēsia* (the “called-out ones,” from the verb *ekkaleō*, “I call out”). This Greek term was used in Hellenistic culture to refer to the citizenry of a city, those who were summoned to vote on civic matters. In the Greek translations of the Old Testament, it referred to the assembly of God’s people, those who had been called by God to enter into a covenant with him.

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The Roman Church had come to think of the church as resident in the clergy. Christendom was the realm in which Christianity was recognized as the dominant or majority religion, over which Christ ruled through the church (i.e., the pope and his subordinates). So all of the people who lived within this realm, who were baptized, who were in obedience to the church, and who regularly partook of the sacrament of Eucharist were recognized as Christians. Heretics, pagans, and adherents of other religions were not included, but everyone else was automatically “in,” provided that the requisite acts had been fulfilled.

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The Protestant churches said otherwise. The church was not resident in the clergy but in the totality of those who had responded to the gospel, the invitation of Jesus Christ to believe in him and to become one of his followers, who then confessed Christ as Lord. The church was the entire people of God: those who were called demonstrated that they belonged to Christ by gathering with the rest of the body of believers who shared a common faith. They recognized one another as fellow believers based on their common declaration and so joined to worship.

Instead of assuming that everyone was automatically included by virtue of being born within the state in which Christianity was the stated faith of the ruler, the Reformers assumed that a person must opt in by making a declaration of faith. The church thus was a voluntary association, rather than a civil constituency of the majority of the population. Therefore, they gathered together as those who had left their sins and the world behind to take up the life of following Christ.

[Slide 18] *The gathered church*

Like the early church, then, the Reformation churches gathered for a different reason and on a different basis and for a different purpose. They were not simply crowds of people who happened to share an ethnicity or were part of a particular ruler’s domain. They were called by Jesus; they had chosen to follow the one who invited them to join his kingdom. And they found themselves in this new community, a community which Jesus founded, and which he insisted on heading.

Some of us in our church have been watching the first two seasons of “The Chosen.” One of the insights that has come up in our discussions is the fact that these disciples of Jesus didn’t choose each other. They chose to follow Jesus, to become part of his movement—and as a result, found themselves hooked together with a bunch of people who weren’t like them. But what they had in common was their allegiance to Jesus, and he was teaching them what it meant to be his people. [Slide 19]

This radical re-thinking of what it meant to be the church was a shock wave that blew through the entirety of western Europe in the sixteenth century. But the Reformers were not simply trying to rid the church of a few errors; they wanted to put the church on an entirely different foundation. They wanted to return to a church that was built on Christ and his teaching. So they not only developed a new theology of the church as the “gathered people of God,” they looked back to the New Testament to see what the earliest disciples did when they actually met together. What did the Bible teach about the early church when it gathered?

[Slide 20] *The early church in Acts*

This morning we read quite a bit from the first two chapters of the book of Acts. These two chapters tell us a great deal about the very first days and weeks of the church following the resurrection of Jesus Christ—not as much as we would like to know, but still, a great deal.

We find, for instance, that Jesus regularly met with the apostles following the resurrection. The Twelve (minus Judas) and some others regularly met together with their risen Lord. What did they do? They listened to Jesus’ instructions and teaching. Jesus explained the Scriptures to them (Luke 24:45) and taught them about the kingdom of God—the same topic that had been his central theme throughout the time he preached in Galilee and Judea, now further clarified by his death and resurrection. He reminded them of a promise that he had made to them earlier, that he would send the Holy Spirit, and he gave them instructions on what to do while they waited for that to happen and what to do after it happened.

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After Jesus ascended to heaven, the disciples continued to gather together. They rightly assumed—or else were specifically directed by Jesus—that they belonged together. Whatever it was that Jesus was going to do by sending the Holy Spirit, it was something that they were all supposed to share in. It was not just for the apostles, nor for the men only. It was for all of them, all who were followers of Christ. They gathered together because they had one thing in common. Well, at this point, they had two things in common, because they were

all Jews. But the main thing that they had in common, the thing that would remain true when the gospel went beyond the Jewish people, was that they had pledged their allegiance to Jesus as Messiah and Lord.

What did they do when they gathered? They prayed. They waited. They prayed some more. Then they received the Holy Spirit and began prophesying and telling everyone around them about Jesus. Peter started preaching about Jesus—the miracles he had done, the people he had healed, how he had died and been raised again, and ascended to the right hand of God; how he had kept his promise and sent the Spirit; how he now called everyone to repent and believe in the good news and become one of God’s children.

As a result, three thousand Jews believed the message, followed through by declaring their faith by being baptized in water, received the Holy Spirit—and started gathering together with the other disciples.

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The most characteristic outward feature of the earliest church is that they were together. They gathered. They gathered in the temple for prayer and to listen to the apostles’ teaching. They gathered in their homes for fellowship, for prayer, for more teaching, and to eat together, to take communion together; to say with symbolic actions and genuine love for one another that they belonged together. They gathered as the people identified not merely as Jews, but as the people of the Messiah, the followers of Christ. They were his people. They followed his word. They prayed “in his name,” that is, in the way he taught them and identified as his disciples. His Spirit lived in them. They told his story to the people around him.

And they continued to gather together. They used their resources to help one another. Their lives were so entwined that no one thought of what he or she owned as being private property, but as something that was available to help whoever had a need. They had begun as a crowd; but they had become a community.

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We love it when people choose to formally join us as members of this church. I sometimes make jokes about how great it is that someone would want to be a part of us, as if that was so surprising. I’m probably misunderstood—another reason why I probably shouldn’t try to tell jokes—because I’m not trying to put anyone in this church down, or to put us down as a church. The truth is that the people of this church are pretty wonderful people; God’s people are great people to know. It’s just that in this world, most of the time the world is looking for all the wrong things and evaluating people and opportunities by all the wrong measures—so they don’t necessarily see us as desirable. And that’s a shame,

because they are the ones missing out on the chance to know some great gifts of God, some rescued sinners who have been redeemed from what they once were and transformed into treasures of his grace.

Jesus is gathering his people. He gathers them into discernible groupings; we call them local churches. Church membership is far more than signing your name on a piece of paper. It is a personal statement of commitment to be identified with a gathered people, a church, part of the body of Christ. It is a bold and brave commitment to follow Jesus alongside of a bunch of other rescued sinners who are still learning what it means to walk with Jesus, who occasionally make a mess of things, who might hurt me unintentionally, and who need to be loved even more than I realize, so that they can be made well and love others in return.

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Church membership is about stewardship of my life—not just my finances. We’ll talk more about finances in the next couple of weeks, but we need to understand that finances is just one part of my life. It’s a critical part of my life, and it touches every other part of my life, so we can’t ignore it or minimize its importance. But stewardship of my whole life—living every day as a follower of Jesus Christ—necessarily involves me with the rest of the body of Christ. It’s certainly possible to fellowship with a bunch of Christians, to worship and work together, and to still remain somewhat on the outside. There’s no shame in that at all. Membership is more a matter of active involvement and relational connection than formal inclusion on the church roll.

But there is something that happens to me spiritually and personally, in my heart, when I say, I want to be known as belonging to you—to all of you, to the whole lot of you. Not because we share an interest in some hobby (though we might); not because we are forced together to survive (at least, not yet!); not because we have a grand cause which we want to see advanced (though following Christ puts us on a mission to advance his kingdom); but because we have been called out from what we were to follow Jesus and to be a part of God’s people. And for whatever reasons, clear or still obscure, he has brought us to this place. So if I’m going to be a good steward of the life God has given me, the new life that only comes from being in Christ, the best way to do that is to become a vital, active, involved member of a church, where I can learn, serve, love, and be loved.

[Slide 25] *Closing*

If you are a member of FCC, let me encourage you today to remember what that means. It means that you are first and always a follower of Jesus Christ, someone who has surrendered your life to him. And it means that you have

recognized that God has brought you here so that for a season, or for the rest of your life, you can be joined to a community who gathers together to worship and care for one another as we learn how to be God's people and fulfill his purposes to advance his kingdom.

If you are not a member, but you would like to become a member, or if you aren't sure if you are a member or not, talk to me or one of the elders after the service. Let's start the conversation about what God is doing in your life, about following Jesus, and if he is calling you to follow him with us in this place.

And if you're not ready to become a member, you're still welcome to keep gathering with us. We would love to start the same conversation about who God is and what he's doing with you. Or if you're not sure about following Jesus, you're still welcome; keep asking your questions and we'll keep doing our best to answer them.

That's why we've gathered here today.

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Transition to communion

[Worship team, if you would begin making your way to the platform . . . ; those who are helping to serve communion please join me in the front . . .]

Benediction /Blessing

*[Lift your hearts to heaven, and your hands if you like . . .]
Invite people to receive prayer; mention membership*