



REBUILDING CHURCH AFTER LOCKDOWN

Making the most of the opportunity

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Introduction

The pandemic and the lockdown have brought many challenges to the churches, not least those of grief and bereavement.

Though the government's restrictions have now been lifted and churches can meet as before, nevertheless lockdown brought a serious interruption to the life of the churches. Things have changed, both in the church and in society. Many pastors and church leadership teams are now grappling with how their churches can recover and how they can do the best for their people and glorify God in the new circumstances. This booklet is written to try to help.

Shaking the world

Many churches have suffered setbacks and we would not want to minimize that. But it is our belief that the situation in which we now find ourselves can be looked upon in a positive light. God has certainly shaken the kingdoms of this world, Hebrews 12.26, 27. But God's shakings of our world are always with the good of his kingdom, and therefore of his church, in mind, Hebrews 12.28.

As a result of lockdown, we are given an excellent opportunity to take stock, pray and rebuild many aspects of church life. Some of the ways we did things in the past have been called into question. Perhaps some ministries we were involved in have gone and may never return. But it is God's intention that we rethink and rebuild. And, under God, we can rebuild better.

In this 21st Century, the world around us has changed and is changing. It may well be God's intention that, at this point in history, through the pandemic, to give the church an opportunity to stop, reconsider and to improve in ways which will prepare us for the future – making us more resilient and potent for Christ within society. So, we can approach this work in a positive light.

Three-dimensional church

With this in mind, in order to try to address different aspects of church life, we have adopted the acronym 'IOU'.

'I' stands for the 'inward' fellowship of the church. 'O' stands for the 'outward' aspect of the church in our outreach to, and our place in, our surrounding communities. 'U' represents the 'upward' life of the church in our worship and

praise of God.¹

The use of 'IOU' is an attempt to give an overall and balanced view of what a local church is about. Some people will want to concentrate just on evangelism, or be concerned with worries over the fellowship angle, for example. But all three areas of church life require addressing – hence the three chapters of this booklet.

¹ These three dimensions of what the church is meant to be about are found, for example, in 1 Timothy 3.14, 15 as he gives Timothy instructions concerning how people ought to conduct themselves regarding the church in Ephesus.

1: Rebuilding inwardly – our fellowship

To begin with, we remind ourselves that the church is extremely precious to God. It is the bride of Christ. It is composed of the gathered children of God. It is indeed the body of Christ – united intimately to him, so that he feels what his church feels. The way members relate to one another in the church is, therefore, to be handled with great care.

Describing the situation post-lockdown

Thankfully there are many churches whose members really love one another and couldn't wait for the restrictions to be over so that they could see each other again and get back to church. These folk are a church's core. We thank God for them.

But though that has happened, many churches have not simply clicked back into gear. They are stuttering in their restart. Here are some reasons why your church might need at least a partial inward rebuild.

- **Lost connection**

Asking around pastors, there is what might be described as a loosening of connections / commitment to the churches on the part of some through lockdown. One of the snares of the use of digital technology during lockdown was that it made a lot of things much more convenient. Church was possible digitally, from your living room sofa. No travelling. No car parking problems. You are 'back from church' at the touch of a button. And with church on a screen from home, you avoid those people you've always had problems with at church. Church from home is just so much easier. For some, because of the love of convenience, there are question marks around returning to church.

And for others, contributing to this loosening of attachment to church is that they are still frightened of catching Covid 19 – and it's safer to stay at home. For others, they have got so used to shielding within their four walls that perhaps they have begun to suffer from a touch of agoraphobia.

- **Lost faith**

For some lockdown may have led not just to a loosening of ties to church, but a questioning of the faith – a distancing from the Lord Jesus. Some may be asking,

‘Is Christianity true?’ – if there is a God why has he allowed this terrible pandemic? ‘Why did my Nan have to die?’ For some it might be related to envy of the godless. For some it may be related to falling into sin – perhaps all that time alone with a computer screen has led to pornography addiction – and they now ask, ‘Am I a Christian?’ They tell themselves that to go to church would be hypocrisy.

- **Lost workers**

During lockdown many of our groups and outreaches had to shut down. And that shutdown time in running the youth work or the seniors’ work has led some church members to down tools. They’ve come to the elders and said, ‘Hey, this break has made me think, I’ve been doing this long enough and it’s the natural time for me to step down and for others to step up.’ And that has left the leaders wondering how that gap is going to be filled.

- **Lost shape**

Your congregation may simply have changed – it’s not the same church. Some families may have moved away. Lots of people have moved house in lockdown including Christians. It may also be that others have joined during lockdown. That’s great. But it’s not the same. People don’t know each other yet – you’ve got fresh faces with no shared history. A football manager would say that his team has lost its shape – its balance. The new players have got to learn to fit into the team – and you, pastor, ‘the manager’, have got to help them do that without making the original members feel taken for granted.

- **Lost unity**

This has been the ugliest. Covid itself brought to the surface issues which have caused tension in the churches. Right from the beginning there were the pro- and anti- vaccine folk in congregations. Then there were people who took the government’s call to close all public gatherings as an attack on religious freedom – and those who didn’t see it like that. Then there were those who were for the wearing of masks and those against. Then there were those who with the easing of restrictions ended up having a go at church leaders – ‘We don’t agree with how you are doing this – we may look for another church’. Though lockdown is over, there may still be some of those tensions swirling around in your church.

The pandemic has shaken up the church. It has exposed fault lines. So, pastor,

you will need to do some repairs, some inward rebuilding.

Understanding the effects post-lockdown

How have Christians been affected by lockdown? Is there anything which particularly lies behind this loosening of ties and has perhaps brought a general cooling off spiritually? What do pastors need to particularly bear in mind and target? I want to suggest that a key issue is how Christian identity has been affected by the constrictions of lockdown.

It is well-known that the structure of many NT letters is the indicative followed by the imperative. Paul, for example, tells people what God has done and who they now are in Christ, before he tells them how to live as a Christian. The change point between indicative and imperative is very obvious, for example, in Colossians 3.1: 'Since, then, you have been raised with Christ (this is who you are), set your hearts on things above (this is what you are to do), where Christ is seated at the right hand of God'. The imperative is based upon the indicative: 'Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off the old self with its practices, and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator', Colossians 3.9,10.

So how we behave as Christians is rooted deeply in who we are and how we see ourselves as Christians – our grasp of our true identity. We will live out who we really think we are.

My thesis is that we have seen this loosening, this cooling off spiritually post-lockdown, because the lockdown restrictions specifically undermined a number of things which are crucial to maintaining and building our Christian identity – who we see ourselves to be. This is true both at the individual level and at the corporate / church level.

- **Individually – who I am**

Your identity is actually not just about who you think you are but is also about who other people think you are. It is not just about who we tell ourselves we are, but about who other people tell us we are.

So, to illustrate, if you want to know what you look like – you look in a mirror. Your community is like a mirror which reflects back to you who you are. Not just God's word, James 1.23, is a mirror, but the community of the church is a mirror

for the Christian. The church says to you in a secondary, but important way, 'We can see you are a Christian who is seeking to live by God's word. We see you as one of us and we treat you like one of us'. And that reinforces your identity as a Christian.

So, the preacher tells the congregation what a Christian is like – but the congregation reaffirms that to you as an individual.

And further, the community gives you opportunity to do the same for others. And that too reflexively confirms to you who you are because you are participating in the family life of the church and your contribution is accepted and helpful. You are acting as a Christian towards others – building their faith – and subconsciously that reaffirms our Christian identity. Paul tells us that it is not just preaching but the 'works of service' among the members which builds up the church, Ephesians 4.12.

When we are deprived of these identity affirming engagements, it can really knock us. That's why I've heard a broken Christian woman who was unfairly dismissed from her church say with tears, 'I don't know who I am any more'. You see the power of that. In lockdown we have been unable to meet and that whole mechanism affirming who we are was more or less shut down – because meeting on Zoom is not the same as meeting in reality. 'Works of service' are hardly possible digitally.

Through lockdown there has therefore come a degree of Christians not knowing who they really are as individuals.

- **Corporately – who we are**

This loosening of things applies not just to individual Christians but to churches.

Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) was a very eminent French sociologist. His pioneering research on groups and communities led him to propose that communities – like church – have a regular need to refresh and enhance their cohesiveness and commitment to one another and what they stand for. It would not be inappropriate to see Sunday church in those terms.

Durkheim thought of human beings as having two levels. Naturally we are individuals in our everyday lives. But we also have the capacity and the need to function on a higher collective level and experience things which we only feel

when we are together with others. This would apply to such things as team spirit, family joy or that special feeling of togetherness and oneness which might come upon us as we are in a choir or on the terraces at a football match. There is a oneness as the football crowd sings ‘We are Millwall’ or ‘We are Arsenal’ to the opposing fans. Durkheim described it as a kind of social ‘electricity’. Interestingly the individual level he labelled ‘profane’ while the corporate level he called ‘sacred’. It is partly the function of a church service to pull people together into that higher collective attitude (linked with what Scripture would speak of as ‘one new man’, Ephesians 2.15). The group’s identity and loyalty are strengthened. And Durkheim identified corporate actions like singing together, dancing together or chanting in unison as particularly powerful in building such a corporate attitude.²

Well things like singing together, the ceremony of taking communion together, which function as something of the corporate glue of a church – which says ‘this is us’ – were taken away by lockdown restrictions. The activities which cement our corporate identity as a church were gone. They were not possible digitally.

That’s why we have experienced this loosening / cooling off.

Responding to the situation post-lockdown

Here we make a number of practical suggestions concerning rebuilding inwardly – rebuilding the church fellowship. But there are two preliminary remarks.

- *First*, the usual / normal ways churches have operated in the past are actually not particularly helpful with regard to the inward life of the church as a whole. So, some of the things we say may appear quite radical.
- *Second*, with that in mind, as was said in the introduction, we can regard the problems which Covid has exposed in a positive light. We are being given a real chance by the Lord to rethink a few things and improve on where we were previously. And if this new opportunity can be used creatively, that in and of itself can be an encouragement for the churches. God is wanting not just to shore us up but to do something positive.

² See *The Coddling of the American Mind*, by Greg Lukianoff and Jonhaid Haidt, Penguin, 2018, page 100

Here are four practical areas to highlight and encourage leaders to think through.

- **Visitation**

Pastor, you are a key man. There are people who came to church before lockdown but have not reappeared. The good shepherd goes after the strays. You have to go and seek them out and tell them that they matter. They need to know that they have not been forgotten. God rebukes the careless shepherds, 'You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally,' Ezekiel 34.4.

Though most of your people have returned, don't forget the few who haven't. Go and visit them. Find out what is going on with them. 'Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it', Luke 15.4.

- **Motivation**

People have lost spiritual momentum and need to be re-energized, given some motivation. Generally speaking, people will not be well motivated by church leaders getting heavy and aggressive towards them. Sometimes people do need challenging, but be careful, pastor. If they are already discouraged, they don't need to be crushed. Christ does not break the bruised reed, Isaiah 42.3. And certainly, it is not the time for leadership teams to arrogate extra powers to themselves – declaring a 'state of emergency' – which can end in lording it over the church. For some church leaders, the first thing they think about when things are difficult is church discipline. This is harsh.

The church needs renewing inwardly. But that will start as individuals are renewed and rebuilt inwardly. Motivation should come from a gracious pulpit. People need to see Christ in all his glory, power and beautiful grace for the church. They need to be encouraged in the love of God. They need to be told that Jesus' words, 'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest' applies not just to enquiring sinners but to broken saints. They need to know that when Jesus says, 'whoever comes to me I will never drive away', this applies to his people feeling their sins and unworthiness as much as to anyone else. The apostle Paul tells us that grace is the great source of strength. 'You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus', 2

Timothy 2.1. People need to fall in love with Christ again. So, choose a preaching series which extols Christ and sends people out of church at the end of the service thinking, 'What a Saviour!' and 'Isn't it great to be a Christian.'

- **Communion**

In Scripture eating together is of immense importance. It is the mark of acceptance and unity. The Lord eats with Abraham, Genesis 18. The Passover is shared in families by all Israel. It is the mark of the nation's identity. The meal says, 'This is who you are – the redeemed people of God'. The elders of Israel eat with the LORD on the mountain as a sign of the covenant bond between the LORD and Israel, Exodus 24.11. And the significance of eating together is why the Lord Jesus got into so much trouble with the Pharisees for 'eating with sinners,' Mark 2.16. It looked as if God accepted dirty sinners! This is why the second great ordinance of the church is a meal together around the Lord's Table, 1 Corinthians 11.20. Eating together means 'we are family'.

But just tacking communion on at the end of a preaching service for 10 minutes really takes away from all that. Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper as part of the Passover meal. In Corinth, the meal together was being abused, but it was a meal together. But our normal procedures in churches have vitiated that. Our little cubes of bread and personal communion cups give the message that salvation is very individualistic. It undermines the whole aspect of togetherness in the church.

Maybe, Pastor, you should think about having the communion as a separate service – linked with a meal together as a church. This is the way to build fellowship.

The communion is both spiritual and social. There is nothing wrong with having a few social events for the church to build family spirit – but the real place for that is as part and parcel of the communion. Eating together equates with family. It is a deep way of saying 'this is us.'

- **Integration**

As part of integrating new people into the church, it would be good to set up a membership course. This gives new people an opportunity, without strings attached, to see what the church stands for – its doctrine, its ecclesiology, its spirit – without first of all committing. It is a 'come and see' opportunity. And

then they can make an informed decision about whether or not to fully commit – or whether they should look elsewhere.

The NT does teach church membership – 1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12 etc. Our very word ‘member’ comes from the idea of the different parts of a body which Paul so often uses in his letters. And if you are looking for a well-connected and committed church then really you have to be upfront about membership. And certainly, it makes a helpful part of rebuilding – especially in the light of new people coming along – because what you don’t want is new people attending, but just becoming a permanent fringe – always on the periphery. That is not going to help the church gel and regain that closeness in the long run. Membership courses integrate people into the fellowship.

Maybe it would be an idea for the whole church to go through a membership course – to refresh the attitudes of even ones who have been in the church a long time and to remind them of what you are really about.

So, in conclusion, actually the problems which Covid has thrown up can really be turned into a positive to rebuild the church better and stronger than it was before. The church is precious to God. Let’s try to make it as good as it can be.

2: Rebuilding outwardly – our outreach

There is no doubt that the Lord has shaken the world and its attitudes through the pandemic and ensuing lockdown. People have suddenly been confronted by the prospect of death and therefore of eternal issues.

Humanly speaking, this has meant many non-Christians are a little more open to listening to the gospel and as churches we must surely seek to make the most of this. God has presented us with something of a new evangelistic opportunity. It is in this context that we can think about rebuilding the church outwardly.

Here is a quote from a Gospel Coalition blogpost written by Sam Chan, which puts what has happened very well. It starts by talking about the secular worldview broadly accepted in the Western world among our friends and neighbours.

Gospel opportunity

‘It’s a storyline of rugged individualism, freedom, and control. But COVID-19 exposed this storyline’s deficiencies, didn’t it? We can’t exist as individuals; we need social responsibility. We’re not free; we’ve been in a lockdown. And we have no control; instead, we have uncertainty.

Our plans for 2020 got ripped up. But this unsettling contingency—and the pandemic’s deconstruction of the Western storyline—is a gospel opportunity. The world is shaken in new ways and searching for answers in new places. Until recently, the secular storyline has been the “better” storyline. We told ourselves there is no God. As a result, there’s also no moral accountability. We get to do whatever we want. The trade-off? There’s also no purpose. But we told ourselves that we can create our own. Suddenly, with COVID-19, the existence of God might not be such a bad thing after all. God gives us a basis for moral accountability. And that’s all we’ve been talking about in 2020—moral accountability—with #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, and the need to wear masks.

The pandemic’s deconstruction of the Western storyline is a gospel opportunity. The world is shaken in new ways and searching for answers in new places. A more secure, satisfying storyline is needed, and Christians should be sharing it.

COVID-19 has exposed that we have a choice of two storylines. Storyline #1 says there is no God. We are only atoms and molecules, just one of many species of

life on this planet. The universe does not care about you. Viruses come and go. Species come and go. This pandemic is just one of many events in the ebb and flow of this universe. It has no meaning. It serves no purpose. Storyline #2 says there is a God. He loves you, made you, and saves you. He sent his Son to be one of us. Jesus died for us and now lives for us. We can also live for him and be part of his mission to bring love, mercy, and justice. Even if we can't see why God would allow a pandemic to happen, we can trust he has a good purpose behind it.

The second storyline allows us to live with uncertainty, trusting there is someone else behind the wheel who knows where the bus is going. The first storyline, meanwhile, is like being in a bus with no driver—and with no way to take control of the wheel.³

In the light of all this how can we rebuild our outreach as a church?

- **Remembering the principles – *they have not changed***

Whether we have opportunities to meet with people or run an evangelistic course online, we remember that our first job is to share the good news of forgiveness and new life through our Lord Jesus Christ as it is taught in Scripture, knowing that the Lord himself will be with us in the work by his Spirit.

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age." Matthew 28.18-20

- **Recapturing the vision – *picking up the loss of momentum***

Witness for Christ is very much part of the work of a local church. We are to shine like stars and 'hold out the word of life' to the lost, Philippians 2.15, 16. Some people, perhaps including you pastor, have felt exhausted by the trials of lockdown. But the gospel itself provides many encouragements to stir us up to action. We have a life-giving message of eternal salvation. This great gift is free to whoever will take it. And we have the beautiful privilege of sharing God's love with a lost world.

³ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/pandemic-opens-doors-evangelism/>

As Scripture says, “Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame.” For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!” Romans 10.11-15

- **Restarting the work – a unique opportunity**

Opposition to the work of God and the gospel is normal. Wherever the NT preachers went, they faced resistance of various kinds, Acts 4.3; 8.18; 13.8; 14.19; 18.6; 19.29 etc. We should not let the difficulty of the job put us off. We should do our best with whatever resources we have and know that we have a great God who answers prayer.

When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became angry and was greatly incensed. He ridiculed the Jews, and in the presence of his associates and the army of Samaria, he said, ‘What are those feeble Jews doing? Will they restore their wall? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they finish in a day? Can they bring the stones back to life from those heaps of rubble – burned as they are?’ Tobiah the Ammonite, who was at his side, said, ‘What they are building – even a fox climbing up on it would break down their wall of stones!’ Hear us, our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on their own heads. Give them over as plunder in a land of captivity. Do not cover up their guilt or blot out their sins from your sight, for they have thrown insults in the face of the builders. So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height, for the people worked with all their heart. Nehemiah 4:1-6

- **Love and good deeds**

The outward face of the church to the community is not simply about the message of the gospel. We are called to ‘do good to all men’, Galatians 6.10. Indeed, the early church in Jerusalem enjoyed great favour among the ordinary citizens, Acts 2.47. We may not have miraculous powers or be able to heal the sick as the apostles did, but we should surely do what we can to adorn the gospel and commend it to our community through love and good deeds. The church should be a source of humanity and kindness in the streets around our meeting place, such that even non-Christians are glad that we are there.

It is especially worth considering what reputation we have in our area, given the increasing hostility towards Bible churches and the gospel which is being generated by the current political correctness which dominates society. What can we do? Even the apostle Peter engaged with this question: 'Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us', 1 Peter 2.12.

In his book *Being the Bad Guys*, the Australian Christian writer, Steve MacAlpine gets us to consider this question. Here is a helpful quotation which encourages us to think very practically:

'Churches which lovingly serve communities that are suspicious of them reveal where their hope lies. They rouse the curiosity of those who reject their message yet benefit from the outworking of their hope.

Are you an urban church? Chances are you are surrounded by people of vastly different social and economic settings, all trying to make a go of it in a lonely city. How can you serve them? Through English language groups? Free financial advice? Child-minding facilities? A breakfast program at a local primary school? The possibilities are endless. God has made a habit of reaching people in cities. After all, his promised future is a city coming down to earth.

Or are you living in a battler area - a place of domestic violence and food shortages? A friend's church in my home city runs a food distribution centre - but it's more than 'drive up and get a box of non-perishables'. Time is taken with each client, tea and coffee are available, seating is ready. People who may have talked to no one all week, or have only been screamed at, are heard and spoken to in love. They are open to hearing about Jesus. Creating a team to run this ministry is daunting, but God can provide. Chances are, you already have frontline servants, backstage players, and those natural, pastorally caring evangelists who love telling hurt people about the Saviour.

Or perhaps, like so many, you live in the commuter belt. Your suburb empties out in the morning and refills in the evening. People are stretched for time, with a complex network of commitments: family, work, leisure and all the 'have-to's' that leave little margin. What about serving the community at the weekend, assisting the local sports clubs, or signing up to the parents' committee at your local children's school? What about asking the local council how your church can volunteer? What about being the church that just takes the pressure off those who are feeling pressured?

Whatever you do, leave your community that little bit better than the way you found it. Why? Because God has promised a new creation. We have the mandate to showcase the new creation now, in fractured but real ways as we await its fulfilment. We can assess the brokenness of our location or investigate what pressures people in our area are likely to be under, and prayerfully respond to these things.⁴

- **Rethinking the Strategy – take another look**

Now is a good time to take another look at how your church is outwardly – how it engages with its community.

- Things have changed for us in the church but they have also changed for everyone else.
- During the lockdown things/ideas kept moving and still keep moving.
- The Lord's people throughout both OT and NT have often been outsiders but there are many examples of people valuing them, listening to them and responding as the Lord was at work using them.
- It is surely a time to be positive and pro-active.
- How can we make our churches a blessing to our communities and make those who are not Christians glad that we are there?

This will require addressing such matters as the following:

- What kind of community is your church?
- What kind of locality/community is your church situated in?
- What is missing in your locality that some people in your church could helpfully provide?

Is there a new day of gospel opportunity staring us in the face? With the Lord's help we can make the most of it.

⁴ *Being the Bad Guys*, by Stephen MacAlpine, The Good Book Company, 2021, page 106 - 108

3: Rebuilding upwardly – our worship

We have been trying to give an overall view of rebuilding a church in the light of lockdown and we have been using the acronym IOU.

I = Inwardly → fellowship, the inner relationships of the church.

O = Outwardly → our relationship with those outside the church and therefore outreach.

U = Upwardly → our worship – we relate to God our Father in heaven.

We now come to consider the church in its upward dimension of worship.

Worship is the most important thing the church will ever do.

- *First*, it is a simple fact that we were created to worship. God loves us and this was his glorious purpose for us from the beginning. Worship is bound up with the whole idea of being made in the image of God, Genesis 1.26,27 – to reflect his glory. It is what it makes us truly human. It might be called the internal design of our hearts. So, in our sin, when we don't know God, our natural reaction is not, not to worship, but to find something else to worship instead.
- *Second*, the very creation around us points us to God. We can't help looking for some rhyme and reason to it all. We were made to seek him and reach out for him, Acts 17.27.

Using Hebrews 10.19-25 we will answer 6 crucial questions, which will set us on the right lines.⁵

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened up for us through the curtain, that is his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we professed, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another – and all the more as you see the day approaching.

⁵ I am indebted here to the book *What happens when we worship*, by Jonathan Cruse, Reformation Heritage Books, 2020

What is worship?

As we have noted, both our very selves and our environment are set up to lead us to worship. But what is worship?

Hebrews 10.2 describes those who come to the OT tabernacle as worshippers. They draw near to worship, v1. The context is one of bringing sacrifices. And the root idea is that of offering – ultimately offering ourselves to God out of love and adoration from the heart, Romans 12.1.

Lockdown may well have diverted people from real worship. I think there are already elements in the way we normally ‘do church’ that undermine true worship and I think that lockdown has exacerbated this still further. Already the way we conducted church was going in the direction of a spiritual entertainment. At the front, before the ‘audience’, here’s the worship leader and his backing group – and then comes the preacher – the star of the show. But then, in lockdown, watching all this on YouTube makes it even more like entertainment. It’s like TV. The audience / congregation is set up to think in terms of whether or not they enjoyed the songs, or enjoyed the preaching. Like an audience, we easily slip into assessing the performances. But that, of course, is not worship.

To worship is to offer ourselves sincerely to God. It is to desire and admire and join the choir in praising God. We are not the audience on Sundays – God is. It is to acknowledge the infinite, peerless ‘worth’ of God – hence worship = ‘worth-ship’ – and to respond by offering ourselves and our lives freely to him. Jesus speaks of salvation in terms of God the Father seeking worshippers, who worship him in Spirit and truth, John 4.23, restoring us to our true purpose, our true selves, our true place in the universe.

That happens as we truly offer ourselves, individually and as a church to God.

What happens when we worship?

When we come together to worship, we meet God. The writer to the Hebrews is using OT imagery. Israel came together at the tabernacle or the temple to worship. We will see more of this later, but you see we too ‘enter the most Holy Place,’ v19, we ‘draw near to God’, v22.

You might say – hold on, I thought God is everywhere. True! But he is not everywhere in the same way or with the same intensity. If he were (mono-modalism), then there would be no point in coming to church. But God has

different modes / ways of being present and he is especially and graciously present when his people gather to worship. Jesus said, 'where 2 or 3 come together in my name, there am I with them,' Matthew 18.20. We meet God.

Imagine finding 50p on the ground on a country walk. You would be pretty foolish if the next time you had need of money you went down a country lane for a walk. No. You would go to a cash machine or a bank. Similarly, if you have an experience of God out in the fresh air or the woods or on a hillside, it makes no sense to seek him there again. If you want to meet God, come to church because that is where God has promised to be specially present.

It is great to see friends at church – especially after lockdown. But actually, we come to church to meet God. Perhaps your people need reminding of that. So we come with joy – but we also come with reverence.

How can we worship?

In our verses, the author tells us, v19-22, that we can enter the Most Holy Place to worship – the 'Holy of Holies' where God's presence is known. We can do so confidently through the blood of Jesus – the blood shed on the cross.

Under the old covenant of OT times, if the people were to draw near to the living God, there had to be a sacrifice. There had to be blood – every single time – because the just desert of sin is death. There were all those animal sacrifices substituting for the people, whose blood was sprinkled on the altar and on the people by the high priest. But not any more: '(Christ) did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption', Hebrews 9.12. The blood of bulls and goats could not really do the job. The perfect and precious blood of the Son of God, however, secures an eternal redemption and purifies us for an eternal worship. That is how we can draw near to God through Jesus blood.

It is also worth reflecting that in OT times, because animal blood could not really atone for human sin, it was only the high priest who was allowed into the Most Holy Place, once a year. But because of the blood of Jesus, the writer to Hebrews says, v19, 'brothers and sisters, we can all enter right into the special presence of God'. We can worship because of Jesus' blood.

And, of course, if it took the blood of Christ for us to be able to worship and engage with God, then we don't try to tell God how he should be worshipped.

We let God set the agenda. It's not about what we would like in the church service, it's about what God says we should do. This is called 'The Regulative Principle.' It is about prayer, praise and preaching.

Where do we worship?

The writer is using OT language here concerning Israel's tabernacle / temple. But where exactly is the Holy Place for us? Where do we enter in? The answer is quite startling.

If the *how* of worship is Jesus, the *where* of worship is heaven. Physically we may meet in a building of bricks and mortar, but spiritually we worship in heaven. Here is what our author says in Hebrews 8.1,2: 'The point of what we are saying is this: We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by man'. Notice the author equates 'the sanctuary' with heaven. As our great high priest, Jesus has sat down at the right hand of God the Father in heaven and that is where he serves in 'the true tabernacle'. And that is what is in mind in 10.19 – the Most Holy Place – which through the Lord Jesus we can confidently enter.

When we meet as God's people, we are counted through the Holy Spirit as meeting in heavenly places. That realm is invisible to us, so we worship by faith. But we are not invisible to God and to heaven. We meet in heaven – before God himself.

Hebrews 12 makes the same point. There we read that when we come to worship, we don't come to what 'may be touched,' like the Israelites did when they assembled at Mount Sinai. Instead, we come to 'Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel', 12.22-24. That's where we meet with God – in the heavenly Jerusalem.

And that's why, if you remember, in the opening chapters of Revelation, the apostle John, blurs the boundary lines between heaven and earth when it comes to the church. We find angels in churches, Revelation 2.1 etc, and elders in heaven, Revelation 4.4.

And that is why the corporate worship of the church is so special. Our earthly gathering together to worship not only parallels the gathered worship of heaven around God's throne but participates in it, Revelation 5.8. Yes, we worship by faith. We cannot see these things directly. Nevertheless, this is what is actually going on.

If we forget this, our Sunday worship is cheapened. If we remember this we come with awe.

Why do we worship?

We have already given one answer – we were made for worship. A second answer is that we worship out of thankfulness for what God has done for us in Christ. But a third huge answer is, of course, that God is so worthy of worship – the fountain of reality, the source of all that is good – and in particular that is seen at the cross. Through Christ he has reconciled sinners to his holy self. We see this afresh in worship.

The new and living way into God's presence, v20, is Jesus. In the OT tabernacle / temple there was a curtain between where worship was carried out and the Most Holy Place where God's presence dwelt (shone out) over the ark of the covenant. In a sense, that curtain separated heaven and earth and was the meeting place between heaven and earth. And Jesus was like that curtain – in an earthly body dwelt the Son of God from heaven. But when he died, our sins were dealt with and the veil of the temple was torn open from top to bottom, Mark 15.38 – the way to God was open for us.

So, we can draw near with a clear conscience – we don't have to feel 'I shouldn't be here – I'm out of place in God's presence.' We can have a clear conscience, v22 – our sins are gone; we are pure (priests) washed clean for God's service. Those are the blessings of the new covenant – the new deal in Christ. We see and participate in these things in worship. And as we do so, those things which God has done for us are underlined to us.

So, when we worship God and 'enter in' by faith, God does something. He, as it were, renews or re-emphasizes the covenant with us. We experience what it is to worship and so feel afresh the reality and power of the gospel. We feel we have drawn near to God and it is all because of Christ.

Has that somehow got lost during lockdown when our meetings have been more

entertainment shaped than perhaps they should have been?

When do we worship?

The writer says, 'Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we professed, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another – and all the more as you see the day approaching', Hebrews 10.23-25.

There's so much here – but notice the writer pictures the church meeting in the run up to 'the Day' – the final day / the day of God when Christ comes. Then the dead shall rise and we will stand before God. Well, the Lord's Day, Sunday, is the prefigurement of that – the day we remember Jesus rose from the dead. It is the forerunner of the day when all the dead shall rise and God's people, with resurrection bodies, join the great worship of eternity. It is the first day of a new creation. So, NT churches met on Sunday, the first day of the new week. The old Sabbath (Saturday) had gone, the new 'Sabbath' (Sunday) had begun.

Conclusion

It may well be that these things have been forgotten during the stresses and strains of lockdown. Pastor, perhaps your church could do with a little bit of rebuilding upwardly. Has your church fallen into thinking of Sundays simply horizontally? Have they forgotten that we meet with a heavenly, upward, dimension to the proceedings? Do we have a real desire, not just to go through the evangelical ritual, but to offer ourselves heart and soul to the LORD in his presence. May the Lord enable us all to renew our worship.

