

Almost fifteen years ago, David Peterson's book *Engaging with God* rocked my world. I had never read a book that so effectively combined faithful biblical scholarship with a passion for the gospel and linked both of them to what we call 'worship'. It remains my number one book to recommend on the theology of worship. His new book, *Encountering God Together*, is a long-awaited follow-up, providing biblical, practical, and insightful guidelines for thinking through how God wants us to meet with him as we meet with each other. He covers a broad range of topics including prayer, Scripture reading, preaching, bodily expression, liturgy, evangelism, and emotions. And as you'd expect, the beauty and power of Christ's atoning work shine throughout. Tight in all the right places and encouraging biblically informed freedom everywhere else, *Encountering God Together* should be read by anyone involved in planning or leading gatherings of the church.

—**Bob Kauflin**, *Sovereign Grace Ministries*

What a breath of fresh air for our meeting with God and one another! David brings his theological insights and his pastoral longings together to help us reflect on how we do church in community. This is a wonderfully healthy and practical guide and challenge for those who lead and speak in Christian gatherings, but also for all of us who participate. To know better what we are doing and why will help us to make the very most of these times.

—**Paul Perkin**, *St Mark's Battersea Rise, London*

David Peterson has done an excellent job in applying the theological framework of his earlier book, *Engaging with God*, to the practical realities of corporate worship within the life of the church. This book is fair-minded and generous, full of biblical insight and practical wisdom. Leaders of churches and congregations, preachers and musicians alike will all benefit from it.

—**John Risbridger**, *Minister and Team Leader, Above Bar Church, Southampton, UK; Chair of Keswick Ministries*

# ENCOUNTERING GOD TOGETHER

Leading Worship Services  
That Honor God, Minister to His  
People, and Build His Church

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First published in the UK by Inter-Varsity Press in 2013 under the title  
*Encountering God Together: Biblical Patterns for Ministry and Worship*

North American edition issued 2014 by P&R Publishing

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ISBN: 978-1-59638-706-5 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-59638-707-2 (ePub)

ISBN: 978-1-59638-708-9 (Mobi)

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Control Number: 2013952802

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## INTRODUCTION

I AM OFTEN DISTURBED or disappointed by what I experience when I go to church. At first glance the issues seem to be practical – poor preparation, inadequate content, inappropriate music, songs that people cannot sing very easily, uncertain leadership and superficial comments about what we are doing. Mostly, however, these practical failings seem to reveal a poor understanding of why we gather, little awareness of how to lead a gathering effectively, and an inadequate grasp of what we should expect from our time together.

Some church services proceed along well-worn paths, familiar to regular attenders but quite strange to newcomers. Little explanation is offered about what is taking place and why it is done. There may be meaningful prayers or a challenging sermon, but overall there is something missing in the experience. At the other end of the spectrum are visitor-friendly services that are more like a concert. Each item is introduced by a ‘master of ceremonies’, but with no discernible flow or direction. There may be enthusiastic singing, but little else to transform the lives of the participants and equip them to serve God in everyday life.

There is little expectation in some contexts that we gather to encounter God and to be renewed in our relationship with

him: church is viewed primarily as an occasion for fellowship and ministry to one another. In other contexts there is little sense of the horizontal dimension to the gathering of Christ's people: church is simply viewed as an occasion for 'worship', however that is conceived. Across this spectrum of views what we do often seems to be determined by what attracts people or makes them feel comfortable. It is easy to be driven by pragmatic, rather than biblical, concerns.

This book is written to help everyone involved in planning and leading church services to think more biblically and creatively about this important ministry. Questions for review and reflection at the end of each chapter make it possible to use the book as a basis for group discussion. Pastors could especially consider using it as a training resource for those who share in the leadership of services.

We encounter God by listening to what he has revealed to us in Scripture and by responding to the work of his Son, as the gospel directs. The gift of his Spirit enables us to minister his truth to one another and to take our part in the building of his church. In biblically informed singing, in reading and reflecting on the Bible together, in biblically driven prayer and praise, and in sharing the Lord's Supper together, God confronts us with his character and will for us and makes it possible for us to submit to and serve him appropriately in every area of our lives.

This book begins by applying the biblical theology I outlined in *Engaging with God* to what we do when we gather as Christians.<sup>1</sup> The first chapter sets our meetings within the

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1. In *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Leicester: Apollos; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992) I show how the theme of worship relates to the developing story of the Bible and relates to topics such as creation, sin, covenant, redemption, the people of God and the future hope.

context of God's great work of gathering a people to himself. Worship is one way of describing God's purpose for us, and so the second chapter outlines how he makes acceptable worship possible for us through the work of the Lord Jesus and the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Chapter 3 develops the related theme of edification, showing how every aspect of our gathering should contribute to the growth and maturation of the church.

Chapter 4 examines 'patterns of service' used in traditional and more contemporary churches, and considers what might be learned from the Bible about the contents, structure and flow of our meetings. What kind of 'journey' might people experience in the outworking of a service? Why is it important that there should be a discernible order to the contributions made? Subsequent chapters deal with listening to God, praying together, praising God and singing together.

Baptism and the Lord's Supper continue to be divisive subjects, even among those who take their stand on Scripture. The last two chapters make suggestions about what could unite us in this area. They focus on what the Bible does and does not make clear. They also suggest what we might learn from the development of Christian thinking and practice after the New Testament era.

Each of the topics in chapters 4 to 10 is examined in the light of the big picture outlined in the first three chapters. Pastoral reflections arising from my own experience are included. I am particularly grateful to musicians and song-writers Brent Keogh and Mark Peterson for comments and suggestions about chapters 7 and 8.

Readers may find that certain practices familiar to them from their own church are not mentioned or are treated only briefly in this book. My aim has been to focus on things that can unite us across the churches and traditions. So the main

emphases of biblical teaching and practice are discussed, with occasional reference to later developments in church history. A desire to be relevant to the surrounding culture can prevent us from discovering how previous generations of believers understood what God would have us say and do when we meet together in his name.

My prayer is that a better interaction with biblical teaching will cause those who lead congregational worship to reflect and plan and contribute more effectively. Our aim should be to honour and glorify God as we take our part in the edification of his church. But we cannot do this unless we engage more honestly and holistically with what he has revealed to us in Scripture, considering also the way Christians throughout history have responded to its challenges.



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## THE GATHERING OF GOD

WORSHIP CONTINUES to be a highly controversial subject in Christian circles. For many, the issues are essentially practical and pastoral. They worry about the content and style of gatherings in their local church, constantly comparing them with what is done 'down the road'. For others, the issues are more fundamentally theological. What is the essence of Christian worship? How should a gathering be structured and led so that God's people can worship him acceptably? What are the indispensable elements of congregational worship? What is the relationship between what we do in church and the worship of everyday life?

Theology and practice cannot easily be separated. Everything we do in God's name expresses a particular understanding of his character and will, whether we acknowledge this or not. We all have an implicit theology of worship, which may or may not be faithful to Scripture. How might an authentic biblical theology of worship be expressed in our gatherings? Theological reflection is an essential step in the

process of evaluating what we do together, so that we might glorify God and edify his church more effectively.

*What theology of worship is implied by the following approaches?*

*Church A:* the main aim of the gathering is to teach and exhort the congregation.

*Church B:* the main aim of the gathering is to encounter God in prayer and praise.

*Church C:* spontaneous contributions from members of the congregation are encouraged.

*Church D:* only a set pattern of carefully prepared prayers is allowed.

### **The big picture<sup>1</sup>**

What we do when we gather as God's people ought to be considered in the light of God's intentions for us. Scripture reveals that God's eternal plan is to unite all things in Christ (Eph. 1:10). To achieve this, God is gathering to himself a vast, heavenly assembly of those who trust in his Son from every nation, tribe, people and tongue (Heb. 12:22–24; Rev. 7:9–17).

At the beginning of human history, fellowship with God was broken because of sin, and disastrous consequences followed (Gen. 3 – 11). We were separated from God and divided from one another. But God initiated a process of restoration designed to bring blessing to 'all peoples on earth' (Gen. 12:1–3). He drew Abraham and his descendants into a covenant relationship with himself, and from that context the

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1. To some extent this section draws on the argument of a 2008 report by the Doctrine Commission of the Synod of the Anglican Diocese of Sydney, entitled 'A Theology of Christian Assembly'.

people of Israel emerged. In his dealings with Israel, God prepared the world for the coming of the Lord Jesus and the gathering of that ultimate assembly of people from all nations.

### **Gathering Israel**

God rescued the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and gathered them to himself at Mount Sinai, describing them as his ‘treasured possession’ out of all nations. He promised that if they obeyed his voice and kept his covenant, they would be ‘a kingdom of priests and a holy nation’ (Exod. 19:3–6). That ‘day of the assembly’ (Deut. 10:4) was decisive and formative for the life of the people from then on. In their wilderness wanderings, and then in the Promised Land, the Israelites assembled on various occasions to meet with God, to express their devotion to him with sacrificial rituals and to respond to his revealed will with faith, praise and obedience (e.g. Exod. 29:38–46; Ps. 95).

In the pattern of worship prescribed for Israel in the law of Moses, sacred places such as the tabernacle and temple, divinely appointed priests, prescribed rituals, and a yearly round of festivals were essential aspects of their gathering to God. Shaped by those gatherings, they were meant to treat one another with mercy, justice and love in every sphere of life (e.g. Deut. 26:1–15). Indeed, when their corporate worship did not provoke them to serve God with everyday faith and obedience, the prophets were strong in condemning the people and their leaders (e.g. Isa. 1:10–17; Amos 5:21–24; Mic. 6:6–8). They were meant to honour and serve God in every aspect of their lives.<sup>2</sup>

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2. I have discussed this more fully in D. G. Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Leicester: Apollos; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), pp. 23–49.

God sought to bless Israel by gathering them to himself, but the judgment that ultimately fell upon them for their disobedience and unfaithfulness was their scattering among the nations (Deut. 4:25–40; Jer. 11:6–13; 19:7–9). Even so, the prophets spoke of the day when God would act to rescue and restore his people, gathering them to himself once more (Deut. 30:1–3; Isa. 40:9–11) and making a new covenant with them (Jer. 31:31–34; Ezek. 36:24–28). All nations would be invited to share in this gathering, ‘to honour the name of the LORD’ (Jer. 3:14–18; cf. Isa. 2:1–5).

### *Gathering the church of Jesus Christ*

In various ways the New Testament proclaims the fulfilment of those promises in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. His mission was to gather the lost sheep of the house of Israel and to be their good shepherd, saving them, leading them, feeding and protecting them as God’s flock (John 10:14–16; cf. Ezek. 34:11–24). More than that, in fulfilment of the original promises to Abraham his purpose was to draw people from every nation to himself (John 12:32), making disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:19). He would build his assembly or ‘church’, against which even the power of death would not prevail (Matt. 16:18).

God has rescued the people of the new covenant from the dominion of darkness and death and has brought them into the kingdom of his beloved Son, ‘in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins’ (Col. 1:13–14). Jesus our ascended High Priest and Saviour-King has gathered those who trust him to God’s throne in heaven, where by faith we are already part of the joyful assembly that is Christ’s heavenly and eternal ‘church’ (Heb. 12:22–24). He continues to grow this church as he sends out the messengers of his Word and enables people by the power of his Spirit to

respond to him with repentance and faith (e.g. Acts 2:37–42; 8:4; 9:31).

### *Anticipating the ultimate gathering*

Christians look forward to the day of Christ's return, when that heavenly assembly will be fully and finally revealed (Rev. 21:1–4). Those gathered together by God in his new creation will continually rejoice in his victory and enjoy eternal fellowship with God (Rev. 19:1–9; 22:1–5). But even now, as believers are gathered to Christ through the preaching of the gospel and have access to the Father in one Spirit through Jesus Christ, they are drawn to each other by this new relationship with God that they share. When they meet, there is a deep bond between them generated by God's Word and God's Spirit (2 Cor. 1:21–22; Phil. 2:1–2).

Every Christ-centred gathering is an expression of our union with him and with each other before God's heavenly throne. The *vertical* dimension (God's engaging with us) is primary. Uniquely among human assemblies we are gathered by God to himself, and he is powerfully present among us by his Spirit (1 Cor. 3:16–17; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:22). So we meet with God in the presence of one another and meet with one another in the presence of God. The *horizontal* dimension (meeting with one another) is created and determined by God's approach to us. God ministers to us through the fellowship of his people and we respond to him as we pray, praise, and listen to his Word.<sup>3</sup>

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3. L. Burns, *The Nearness of God: His Presence with His People* (Phillipsburg: P. & R., 2009), shows how the theme of God's presence with his people is expressed in the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. Burns draws particular attention to the transforming implications of God's presence with us through the incarnation of his Son and the gift of his Holy Spirit.

But each of our gatherings, week by week, should also be an anticipation of the ultimate assembly of God's people around his throne in the new creation. Since we await that ultimate experience of fellowship with God, Christian assembly should express an 'already but not yet' tension. We are already 'in Christ' and yet we wait to be together 'with Christ' in the new creation (1 Cor. 11:26; Heb. 10:24–25).

Christian assemblies can take place anywhere, at any time. Under the new covenant there are no earthly sanctuaries to which we must come for worship (John 4:21–24). We, not the buildings where we meet, are God's 'house' (Heb. 3:6). A Christian congregation is God's 'temple' (1 Cor. 3:16–17), where his Spirit dwells. Jesus' promise to be present wherever two or three gather in his name should be related to this (Matt. 18:20). The risen and ascended Lord is present with his people through his Spirit, who enables us to minister to one another and to know God better.<sup>4</sup>

The exalted Lord Jesus Christ is the only priest we need for constant access to God (Heb. 8:1–6; 10:19–23). Our 'altar' is the cross, where Jesus shed his blood to make us his holy people (Heb. 13:10–12). Since he was 'sacrificed once to take away the sins of many' (Heb. 9:28; 10:10, 14), there are no prescribed rituals for us to follow. Worship is to be expressed in every sphere of life, as a grateful response to the saving work of Christ.

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4. Although Matt. 18:20 and 1 Cor. 5:3–5 specifically focus on meetings for disciplinary decisions, the promise of Christ's presence can be applied to any assembly in his name. But Matt. 18:20 does not mean that any gathering of two or three believers constitutes a church. In Matt. 18:17 'the church' is clearly a larger entity than the 'two or three witnesses' mentioned by Jesus.

In view of God's mercy, we are to offer our bodies 'as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper service' (Rom. 12:1).<sup>5</sup>

Acknowledging that we are receiving 'a kingdom that cannot be shaken', we are to be thankful and 'so serve God acceptably with reverence and awe' (Heb. 12:28).

Through Jesus we are continually to offer to God 'a sacrifice of praise – the fruit of lips that openly profess his name', and we are to express our gratitude to God by doing good and sharing with others, 'for with such sacrifices God is pleased' (Heb. 13:15–16).

## **Experiencing the gathering of God**

God gathers his people to himself as an act of grace. So when we come together, our intentions and actions need to be shaped by God's purpose in drawing us together. Every time we meet, we need to be reminded of the basis of our relationship with God and with one another. Every gathering should be gospel-shaped. There should be an opportunity to hear again about God's character and his will for our lives, exciting various expressions of faith, hope and love.

### ***Gathering by God's grace***

The word of the gospel creates and nurtures Christ-focused, Spirit-filled assemblies. The gospel proclaims the basis on which we may relate to God and provokes thanksgiving for

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5. I have modified the NIV translation of Rom. 12:1 and Heb. 12:28 to indicate that the Greek more literally means 'serve' or 'service'. The next chapter will explain this and show how worship terminology from the Old Testament has been adapted in the New Testament to describe the work of Christ and the response we should make to it.

all the blessings we have received (1 Cor. 1:4–7; 1 Thess. 1:2–5). God speaks to us through the Scriptures (2 Tim. 3:16–17; Heb. 3:7–11) and through Spirit-directed ministries of teaching, exhortation, and admonition to one another (1 Thess. 5:14–23; Heb. 3:12–15; 10:24–25). The ‘message of Christ’ may also be heard in songs that express biblical truth (Col. 3:16), in biblically informed prayer, in testimonies, in a baptismal service or in the Lord’s Supper.

According to Ephesians 3:10, God’s purpose is to make known ‘to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms’ his manifold wisdom ‘through the church’. Ephesians 2:11–22 especially highlights the wisdom of bringing Jews and Gentiles together in one body, fulfilling God’s plan to bring believers from every nation into his new creation. God’s great work transcends racial, social and gender differences (Gal. 3:26–28). Our ‘access to the Father by one Spirit’ through faith in Christ (Eph. 2:18) is a testimony to God’s extraordinary grace.

God’s wisdom is further displayed when those drawn together by the Lord Jesus love one another with the same love with which he has loved them (Eph. 4:1–3; 5:1–2). In particular, we can express that love in the way we minister to each other (1 Cor. 13:1–7; 14:26–33; Eph. 4:15). By loving one another and expressing our unity in Christ, we demonstrate that our gatherings are genuinely Spirit-led (Rom. 15:30; Gal. 5:22), and we anticipate God’s new creation together.

People from every nation are called to glorify God and submit to him in worship (Deut. 32:43; Ps. 96:7–9; Rev. 14:6–7). This is made possible by the saving work of the Messiah, who draws people to himself (John 12:32; Rev. 5:9–10). Rejoicing



together in his salvation, we can testify to the fulfilment of God's purpose in the Lord Jesus.

But the apostle Paul also reminds us that we need to have 'the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ' (Rom. 15:5-6; cf. Phil. 2:5-11). In other words, we express who we are as the redeemed people of God by praising him together *and* by loving one another.

### ***Gathering to express fellowship in Christ***

We meet together because by God's grace we belong together. We have all heard the one gospel, received the same Spirit, and been united as members in the one body of the Son. We meet to express the fellowship in Christ that is God's gift to us. Unbelievers may be present and may become Christians because of what they hear (1 Cor. 14:24-25), but the primary purpose of the regular gathering is not to evangelize unbelievers, as I shall argue in chapter 3.

Christian fellowship is a sharing together in Christ and the benefits of his salvation (1 Cor. 1:9; 10:16-17), not merely friendship with like-minded people. We participate in something beyond ourselves. We are always in fellowship with each other and the Father through the Spirit (Eph. 2:18), because we are all members of the heavenly assembly of Christ (Eph. 2:6). But we need to experience that fellowship in practical ways by meeting together regularly and ministering to one another (Acts 2:42-47; 11:21-26). Those who believe the apostolic witness and share in the apostles' fellowship with the Father and the Son (John 17:20-23; 1 John 1:2-3) need to confess what they believe to one another for the encouragement and strengthening this brings (Heb. 3:1-6; 10:19-23; 13:15; 1 John 4:2-3, 15).

Encountering God in the fellowship of his people shapes the nature of our relationship with God and determines the nature of our relationships as the community of Christ. We are addressed by God as a congregation of his people, and we respond together in prayer, praise and submission to his will. We grow together in him and share together in the grace he bestows.

### ***Gathering to promote the growth of the church***

Christians are members of the heavenly or ultimate assembly Christ is gathering to himself (Matt. 16:18; Heb. 12:22–24). From an earthly perspective, however, the church is still growing and being built (Eph. 2:19–22; 1 Pet. 2:4–5). The Lord continues to add believers to his assembly and enables us to grow in our relationship with him and with one another. In fact, Christian assemblies require further ‘building’ or edification in the sense of strengthening to prepare them to meet Christ on the last day (Col. 1:28; Eph. 4:11–16).

Biblical teaching about the building of the church is so important that chapter 3 will be devoted to exploring it more fully. However, three things can be said at this point. First, many gifts and ministries are given by God to believers to enable growth and development to take place (Rom. 12:3–8; 1 Cor. 12:1–31; 1 Pet. 4:10–11). Second, these gifts and ministries must be exercised in love if the church is to be edified (Eph. 4:15–16; 1 Cor. 13:1–13; 14:1). Third, everything that takes place in the assembly – praying, singing, exhorting, teaching, confessing, giving – must be for the strengthening, encouraging and comfort of others, not merely for self-edification (1 Cor. 14:1–19).

### ***Gathering to worship***

It is common for Christians to talk about gathering for worship and to narrow the meaning to activities such as prayer and

praise. But the next chapter shows how the New Testament uses the terminology quite broadly to describe our response to Jesus and the gospel in every area of life.

The exercise of gifts in ministry to one another is certainly an aspect of the *service* we are to offer to God (Rom. 12:1–8). Moreover, Acts 13:2 describes those meeting for prayer as ‘*worshipping* the Lord’, and 1 Corinthians 14:25 envisages that prophesying in a congregation might move unbelieving outsiders to ‘fall down and *worship* God’. However, since other terms such as ‘fellowship’ and ‘edification’ can describe the purpose of gathering, it is not helpful to use ‘worship’ as the main or exclusive term.

One of the issues we shall need to explore is the relationship between what we do when we gather together and the worship of everyday life. As a conclusion to this chapter, however, it could be said that God’s gathering activity is designed to make worship that is pleasing to him possible, both now and throughout eternity.

### Summary

Ever since God called Abraham and his descendants, he has been gathering a people to himself. The rescue of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt allowed them to meet with God at Mount Sinai, where they heard the conditions for being ‘a kingdom of priests and a holy nation’. They were to engage with God at the tabernacle, and later at the temple, through the mediation of priests with sacrifices and other rituals. By this means, God would keep them in an exclusive relationship with himself. Shaped by this formal pattern of worship, they were meant to serve God in everyday faith and obedience.

When Israel proved unfaithful and idolatrous, God’s judgment fell. But the prophets revealed that God would restore his people, transform the pattern of worship he had

given them, and gather people from every nation to share in the life of his renewed people. The New Testament proclaims the fulfilment of these promises in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Through his death and resurrection Jesus has achieved a rescue from sin and its consequences. Through the ministry of his Word and his Spirit the ascended Lord continues to draw people into his heavenly church and to build them up. Every congregational meeting should be an anticipation of the final gathering of believers from every nation into God's new creation. Such gatherings should enable us to prepare for and move together toward that ultimate encounter with God.

### **Questions for review and reflection**

1. What is the implicit theology of worship in the congregation where you belong?
2. Why is it important to understand the biblical picture of God's gathering activity?
3. What practical difference could it make to our weekly gatherings to see them as anticipations of the final gathering of Christ's people in the new creation?
4. List the reasons for gathering together outlined in this chapter and rank them in importance from a biblical perspective.