

Is Online Church Really Church? A Theology of Technology and Presence

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It's official: people stayed home for Easter.

According to the *Washington Post*, cellphone data tracking Americans' behavior showed a spike in attendance of more than 50 percent for Easter 2019. [For Easter 2020, attendance plummeted by more than 75 percent.](#)

For Orthodox Christians, Easter was last Sunday. [Their churches were mostly empty as well](#), as believers were either banned from attending Sunday services or urged to watch them on national television broadcasts from home.

Church closures have been controversial during these days. New Jersey's governor has been criticized for [allowing liquor stores to be open while churches are closed](#). A federal judge has [blocked the Kansas governor's order limiting in-person attendance at religious worship services or activities to ten people or fewer](#), signaling that it likely violates religious freedom and free speech rights.

Many pastors, however, are focusing not just on the present but on the future. When social distancing restrictions are modified or removed, how will we do church? How will these weeks of forced distancing affect our worship services, ministries, and personal leadership when they are over?

It would be difficult to address all the practical dimensions of this issue today since there is much we do not yet know:

- Will we be required to keep six-foot distances between all members at all times? How would this affect baptisms, communion, and the performance of weddings and funerals?
- Will we be required to open gradually (i.e., fifty members at first, then larger gatherings in the future)? If so, how will we tell people who arrive after all the spaces are taken that they cannot attend services or other functions?
- Will our members (perhaps seniors, especially) want to continue using technology to stay in touch?
- Will we continue to connect with people beyond our local congregation if we continue to broadcast our services and other events online?

For today, I'll attempt to offer a more foundational perspective by asking the question, to what degree is an online church a church? What does Scripture teach about the significance of physical presence? Are there biblical guidelines to help us forge a new future in a post-pandemic but more digital world?

Here are my initial reflections on a subject that will likely be much discussed over the weeks and months to come. Consider four biblical principles.

One: The church is a community

Every image of the church in the New Testament is collective. We are a body with many members (1 Corinthians 12:12–27), a vine with many branches (John 15:1–7).

This collective nature extends across geography, culture, and time. The first impulse of the first Christians in Jerusalem was to gather those who responded to the gospel into a fellowship built around teaching, worship, and prayer (Acts 2:42). When Paul preached the gospel in unreached areas, he immediately moved to lead new believers into community with leaders (cf. Acts 14:23; 16:40).

When John was given a vision into heaven, he saw "a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb" (Revelation 7:9). It has been noted that there are no solos in the book of Revelation.

Tragically, our culture has become even more fragmented and existentialistically individualistic in recent years. Technology enables people to be whoever they pretend to be online and to act with little accountability. Brand loyalty is diminished in a consumer-first economy.

Social distancing can feed this consumeristic mentality whereby members "shop" for the "best" online services and preachers to the exclusion of their local community and ministers. Without appearing to be self-serving, we need to do what we can to teach them that the church is a community. Perhaps a study series on this subject would be helpful as soon as is appropriate.

We can use technology to enhance community as well. Senior adults who have difficulty traveling to the church campus can stay in touch with each other through social media, texting, etc. Those who are traveling out of the city can worship with us through our online services.

There are clearly ways to enhance community through technology. My point is that we must do so for the sake of community, not consumerism. These are means to the larger end of being the family of God together.

Two: The church exists for God's missional purposes

As we know, Jesus founded the church (Matthew 16:18). Our purpose was and is to assault "the gates of hell," to take the gospel to the nations (Matthew 28:19).

This missional purpose should be the means by which we evaluate our strategies going forward. For instance, if we can reach more people by continuing online services and resources, we should continue to offer them. If we can reach unreached people through the anonymity of digital outreach, we should do so.

However, we should measure such strategies by their outreach potential in contrast to consumeristic priorities. While it might be easier for people to worship at home, when they can gather with others, they should do so (see principle one above).

Three: The church ministers in community

The communal nature of Christianity does not end with services and events for its members. When God called Paul and Barnabas to begin the first missionary journey, he did so through the church at Antioch rather than speaking personally to them. The believers prayed for them "and sent them off" (Acts 13:3), indicating their continued support. Paul consistently returned to this church to report his experiences and the progress of the gospel.

He did the same with the church at Jerusalem as well, reporting to James and "all the elders" (Acts 21:18). He knew that his individual ministry was to be exercised within the support and accountability of the larger body of Christ.

The same principle extends to digital ministries today. Accountability and mutuality are vital lest these activities become self-centric and self-dependent. Whatever we do to reach people through online means should be done under the leadership of the Lord through the larger body of Christ.

Four: The church belongs to Jesus, not to us

When Jesus founded the church, he called it "my" church (Matthew 16:18). Scripture consistently teaches that he is the "head" of the church (cf. Ephesians 5:23; Colossians 1:18).

As a result, we should seek his leading as we move into this new era of ministry, looking for ways to glorify him and extend his kingdom as effectively as possible.

Many years ago, a very wise member of the church I was pastoring said to me, "Jim, it's not about us."