

Can We Continue Doing Virtual Church after COVID?

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It's 9:00 on a Sunday morning and you're still in your pajamas waiting for your morning coffee to brew. A year ago, before the COVID pandemic, you'd have been getting yourself and your family ready for church. But this morning, as you've been doing for months now, you'll stay in your PJs and "go to church" online.

Your local church had been prevented from gathering for a few months during the pandemic. For the sake of your neighbor, to follow guidelines, your church felt it wise for a season to suspend the physical gathering of the body and move the "gathering" to online-only. But a few months ago, the church opened back up and around 65% of your church has gone back to physical gathering. Even though you are now vaccinated, you have decided to continue worshipping at home with your family. It seems to fit your schedule and your personality better to just watch online. Is this okay to do? Does it still count as church?

To effectively answer this question, we need to ask questions about the nature of the church and consider why we gather in the first place. We gather to worship, to pray, to give, to hear the preaching of the Word, to serve one another, and to find community with others. What of these can you not also do online? You can hear the [Word of God](#) preached—even from multiple pastors. With online chat rooms and comments one can pray together and find community. Many people were even giving online before the pandemic. Perhaps the worship is a bit different—it's harder to sing to one another, but there are ways to have an online experience of worship that can match the in-person version. If you had the proper elements in your home, you could even perhaps partake of the Lord's Supper. So why do we need to gather when I can do church at home?

The problem is that in the Bible, church is not something you do as much as it is a people. As [Andy Huetten](#) rightly says, “The event of Sunday morning worship with preaching, prayer, singing, and fellowship is what the church *does* when it gathers, but family is what the church *is*.” When I’ve tried to define church, I’ve leaned towards calling it something like a blood-bought community of believers who have covenanted and gathered together for the glory of God. You can do church online, but you cannot *be* the church online.

Benefits of Online “Church”

This is not to negate some of the benefits of being able to move our church services online. It is beneficial for many that they can “do” church online. I think of all of the shut-ins, or those with compromised health, who are now able to attend our services. It is also wonderful to keep people connected to us even while they go on vacation. It is a blessing for the church to have some semblance of gathering even when they cannot be physically present.

I also think of all those who struggle with things like social anxiety, deep depression, and even the ramifications of church abuse and trauma. Sometimes watching a service online could be a huge step towards finding church a psychologically safe space again. I would not want to minimize this blessing and potential avenue for healing.

Yet these are not ideal. I am sympathetic to what Mark Dever said when his church decided against online-sermons:

“Because a video of a sermon is not a substitute for a covenanted congregation assembling together and all the various means of God’s grace in that. I think it would be healthier to respect God’s strange providence in a period of abstinence from meeting together.”

There is something about the physical gathering of believers that is different than an online-gathering. There is a physical presence that matters. If you don’t believe me, consider the earthiness of the Incarnation. There is a flesh and blood aspect to our redemption and that is reflected with the church gathering physically.



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The Pendulum Swing

The question of online church is largely a generational question. Though many boomers and builders might have to stay home because of health reasons, they would not think of asking a question of whether or not they should physically gather if they are able. But those who grew up on the internet think of the world and community differently. Online community *is* real community, to question this seems just as strange as “online-church” to an older generation.

Though biologically I am of the younger age, theologically I’m probably a bit older soul. I believe there is something which my generation has missed that preceding generations understood well; namely, the power of showing up. And I think what we are seeing today is a pendulum swing (perhaps an overswing) that has come from a few excesses of preceding generations.

In regards to a gathered body, I believe there was for many an overemphasis upon the church building. One of my greatest pet peeves is hearing someone say that they cannot “do that in God’s house,” as if the whole world does not belong to the Lord. I believe an overemphasis upon a building betrays a misunderstanding of the nature of the temple and the new [covenant](#) community.

My generation (or maybe those a tad older than me) responded with a de-emphasis upon the sacred gathering. Church isn’t a building; it is a people. And therefore we can gather anywhere at any time. There is truth to this, but there is something special about the local gathering of the body of Christ. There *is* something sacred about the space where we open up God’s Word and the gospel is preached. It does not have to be in a building – it can be in a field – but there is something special about the physical presence of a gathered body.

Secondly, I believe some families in the past were wrecked by ministers of the gospel who felt they (and their entire family) were required to be physically present at the church building every time the doors were open. Some perhaps developed a legalistic

mentality of church attendance. But we oversteered when we de-emphasized the power of personal presence. There *is* something powerful about you being physically present.

I can't seem to keep Bonhoeffer's [Life Together](#) on my shelves during this season. I keep pulling it down and reading it. The longer we find ourselves with our communities ever transforming due to COVID-19, the more I'm finding depth in his words. Consider this:

“The prisoner, the sick person, the Christian in exile sees in the companionship of a fellow Christian a physical sign of the gracious presence of the triune God. Visitor and visited in loneliness recognize in each other the Christ who is present in the body; they receive and meet each other as one meets the Lord, in reverence, humility, and joy. They receive each other's benedictions as the benediction of the Lord Jesus Christ” ([Bonhoeffer](#), 10).

What Bonhoeffer is alluding to here is the fact that each believer is in union with Christ and has the Spirit of God residing within. There is power—Christ within you—by you just showing up. How can you be a representative of the physical Jesus virtually? How can you be the hands and feet of Jesus when you cannot put your hand on the shoulder of a brother in Christ? How can you be Christ and give your grieving sister a hug in the name of Jesus?

We do not “greet one another with a holy kiss” but that is in our Bible for a reason. I'm not suggesting we start locking lips in our churches, but this verse helps us see that healthy physical touch truly is an important part of our gathering.

Why You Should Go Back to Physical Church if You Are Able

[I say this because](#) I believe that Christ is within me and I believe my brothers and sisters in Christ need that Christ within me. There is power in my presence—because it's a symbol of the very real presence of Jesus Christ among us.

So – and please hear me well – I want to show up because to not do so would be to diminish Christ. I know some could read that and say, “what about those who cannot attend?! You are making them feel horrible for something which they cannot control.” This is my response. Whether it be because of conscience or health concerns, my aim here is to give words to the very pain which you feel. I'm sharing why we mourn *with* you that you cannot gather with us. Fellowship with other believers *is* a precious gift. You know this deeply and it's why you ache, and toss and turn, and feel as if something deeply important is missing in your life. Because something important is missing.

As Bonhoeffer said it is “an unspeakable gift of God” but also one which is “easily trodden under foot by those who have the gift every day.” COVID-19 has given all of us

an opportunity to mourn with our shut-ins. It has widened that number and opened our eyes to the value of in-person gathering, and the deep mourning which accompanies no longer being able to gather.

But this is also *why* I feel a deep conviction, as long as I am able, to gather with the body of Christ. To not gather, to treat it as some insignificant thing, to consider it an option to my walk with Christ, would be to trample under foot the gift of the presence of Christ in the life of another believer. I'll admit it was wonderful for a few weeks to wake up on a Sunday morning, smelly breath, wild hair, still in my PJs and "gather" online with other Christians. But for me to continue to do this by choice when the church *is* gathering would be to value the comfort of my Wal-Mart bought Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle jammies over the blood-bought community of the living God.