

Virtual Church?

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With the advent of the internet and media available online so freely, and the expansion of internet usage, churches are beginning to post their services online. More than that, they provide live streaming audio and video to anyone who wants to watch! This is a really great advancement for those who are shut-ins, who can't get to church, or who may be out of town but want to tune in. Unfortunately for a growing amount of people, internet church has become their only means of church.

Toward the end of this article, I will give five reasons I see in the Bible for this being unfortunate. Media has always been part of the cutting edge of the Church. Churches got involved in radio and made Christian radio stations, but most of them were not live. Television has long been another way of not only hearing, but watching a sermon, including another of the five senses. Many people are beginning to make the case that there is no need to physically go to church with such advancements. I disagree, and not because I get paid to pastor and preach in a church. I have biblical reasons.

These folks are split between hailing the power of technology and saying that they are as much there virtually in a church as they are spiritually. There are even a couple of projects where the church is entirely online! They cite true concepts such as the building not being the church, but the saints being the church. This is indeed accurate, as we will point out as well. Others take it farther and go the other way. They say that

going fishing is church for them. They observe God's nature and worship Him instead of being in a crowded auditorium on Sunday. There is a slight validation of their point, but only slight in Scripture.

All of these viewpoints and approaches beg the question of what the church really is. How do you define the church? What is the church composed of? Is there a need for physical contact in churches, or do internet churches do the same thing the first century did? All of these questions are valid, but I don't believe that we can go so far as to say that having virtual church is equal to physically going to church. There are at least five reasons I see in Scripture for why we must physically go to church. But first, let's define church a bit better.

What is the Church? Why is it sometimes capitalized and other times not? The Bible gives the impression that the Church is the whole people of God everywhere. We call this in theology the Invisible Church, or the Universal Church (not to be confused with the Universalist Church!). This is the whole people of God in other countries and around the world, which we join with as we worship locally each time we meet. Then there is the Visible Church, or the Local Church. This is a gathering of local believers you can see and touch. One of the comforts for a smaller church is that they are not alone but join a much larger Invisible Church.

The Church is the gathering of like-minded believers who trust in the Lord Jesus Christ

and hold to the truth of Scripture. I believe that there are certain criteria that each church must demonstrate, which I mainly get from Acts 2:42-47. I believe the Church, Visible and Invisible, has the goal of worshipping God, hearing God's Word, demonstrating compassion, fellowshiping together, and evangelizing the world through word and deed. These are some of the core elements of what the early church did every time they met together. This means that the church is not a building, but a glorious building of each believer gathered together to form a holy house for God (1 Peter 2:5). So the idea that we have to meet "in the church building" is not biblical. The saints themselves are the church. But that doesn't mean we don't have to gather together.

The words for church bear this out better than I ever could on my own. One of the words for church expressed and used in the New Testament is the Greek word *ekklesia*. This word means assembly or gathering. This is the most common usage of that word, speaking of the church. So in the sense of the very word church, a group is understood. The word saint in the Bible means called out ones or holy, unique, separated ones.

So the church is the gathering, the group, of unique and separated ones. We are separated from the world, but we are welcome with one another. Now, with that understanding, we know that the church in Acts met together in homes. There could be tens or hundreds of little "house churches" throughout a city. But you will notice when Paul addresses a letter, he addresses the church as a whole in each city. The word for church is singular, not plural. So all of these little gatherings were seen as only being part of the whole city church. Another interesting note to mention is that the Church is first

mentioned in the Gospels by Jesus, and He bases His Church off of the confession of Peter that He is the Christ in Matthew 16:18. Church is meant to mean an assembling of people, not a single person.

If that is the case, why do we need to gather together? What can we do in person physically present that we can't do on an internet church? Surely we can donate online and hear and watch a sermon and hear and watch worship music and participate perhaps in discussion to learn about whatever is being discussed. Do we really need to physically be there? Here are five reasons I believe we need to be physically present in a local church and deeply involved:

1. **Fellowship.** Fellowship is almost always followed by phrases like "with one another." The word fellowship in Greek, *koinonia*, means common or to share or to have something in common. How can you have something in common with yourself? How can you fellowship with yourself? That's like hugging yourself, and that's kind of weird! You have to have other people to fellowship, and fellowship is one of the most important parts of going to church (Some Scriptures on Fellowship: Acts 2:42; 1 Cor 1:9; 2 Cor 6:14; 13:14; Gal 2:9; 1 John 1:3, 6, 7). The Bible speaks first of having fellowship with Jesus as believers, and then of having fellowship with other believers.
2. **Corporate Worship.** While it is true that we can personally worship God and spend time in prayer, and that we

can personally receive guidance from the Holy Spirit, it is also demonstrated in the New Testament that we must gather together for corporate worship. 1 Corinthians 11-14 is almost entirely dedicated to the corporate setting. What good is prophecy if it is not heard by others? There is an entirely different dimension to corporate worship that you cannot get in private worship. I have personally had times when I didn't feel like worshipping God. Maybe I was going through something hard, and perhaps I might have even been blaming God. But in a corporate setting, hearing the testimony of others and being with others encouraged and energized me in my worship. There is something about hearing a whole host of people in a room praying and glorifying God. You can't get that alone (Some Scriptures advocating corporate worship: Ephesians 5:18-21; Col 3:16; Hebrews 10:25).

3. **Living the Christian Life.** Although it is not specifically mentioned as Jesus gives us the Beatitudes in Matthew and Luke or as Jesus talks about how we interact with one another, it is understood and implied that we must actually interact with others to demonstrate obedience to Christ's commands. When Jesus says to love others, how can we demonstrate love of others if we're not around people? How can we forgive others if we don't communicate with others? Isolating

ourselves from God's Church makes it very hard to obey His commands, which almost always concern other human beings. Granted, these are also about our relationships with unbelievers, but we must be encouraged to live in obedience, and we get that in Church. How can you learn to be forgiven if not by another believer who maintains the same value of forgiveness? We may not be forgiven when we apologize to unbelievers, but believers are held to that same standard of forgiveness. We need that! We learn from one another and challenge one another and encourage one another.

4. **Body Ministry.** One of the metaphors for the Church is based on Paul's understanding of body ministry, ministering to one another, in 1 Corinthians 12:27. That might be the clearest statement in the Bible about the Church's composition, and it hinges on the image of the human body and its members working together. In body ministry, we bring ourselves as gifts, the gifts the Holy Spirit has given us, and the talents and wisdom and abilities we possess from God, and we contribute in a unique way to the unique body of Christ. Many believe that they will lose their uniqueness when they become believers, but it is rather enhanced by Christ and used for His Kingdom and His Church! God gave you specific talents, gifts, skills, and experiences that you can use in ministry to others in a corporate

setting. You can't minister to yourself, just like you can't fellowship with yourself.

5. **Discipline.** Although many churches do not practice godly discipline of their members anymore, and the fact of so many denominations and churches without communication between them allows for someone to leave one church and go to another, there is clear evidence that the church was gathered to discern in-house matters. There is an example from 1 Corinthians 5 where a man who claims to be a believer is committing adultery with his own mother! Paul says first that even unbelievers don't do that, and then he says that when they are gathered together, and the Lord is present, and he is with them in spirit, they should expel the immoral brother! (1 Corinthians 6:4-5). The church can gather to discipline and then to receive back those who are repentant, as we see in 2 Corinthians 2:5-11 where Paul advises them to accept this repentant man back into their assembly.

After seeing some of these reasons for the need to physically be in Church, we can remember a statement once made that no man is an island to himself. We are designed as social creatures. We don't generally like to be alone forever. Beyond this, what would your walk with God look like if you only had the resources that you could individually demonstrate. No Christian has all the gifts of the Spirit, for example. What if you were a prophet. Who would you

prophesy to? We need one another and we're better together when we combine our resources. Can the Church and you personally, make more of an impact for Jesus in this world if all we have is our own resources, or if we had a host and a cloud of witnesses behind us, helping us, encouraging us, providing wisdom and engaging us?

I believe that while it's nice to have available technology, we need to personally be involved in the local church and physically be present so that we can join in the work of God around the world. A clear reading of Luke and Acts together would show that Jesus came to this earth and ministered, and then He left His ministry to the Church. The Church is now that body of Christ. Christ is preparing a place for us in Heaven, but His body is still very active as the Church all around this world. Joining in the work of God requires us to rub elbows with one another, and you know what? It's really fun too! So join in and bring your personal uniqueness into the Church, cause God can use you in so many ways among us, rather than on your own.