

Should We Replace the Local Church with Internet or TV Church?



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Internet and TV preachers who are fundamentally sound can be a blessing to us, especially when we are handicapped, bedridden, possess disabilities, and are incapable of coming to church. However, we must be careful of falling into the trap of substituting media churches for local church membership and fellowship in assembly life. Beware of disregarding the local church and replacing local church attendance and commitment for cyber churches.

Is a *virtual* attender the same as a *physically* present church attendee? Is church *online* better than church *onsite*? The answer to these questions should be based on the Bible – God’s final authority. Some Christians are concluding that they can skip attending church by simply opening a browser on a computer and watching a cyber service. However, they need to think biblically on this matter and live biblically when it comes to attending church.

Why can’t I go to church online? Here are some Bible reasons why you should not replace the local church with the media church.

- Because the word “church” means a called-out assembly, a religious gathering or Christian community (the house of the Lord) that meets together in Christian fellowship (Acts 2:47).

- Because refusing to *physically* meet with God's people is forsaking (abandoning) the assembling (gathering together) of ourselves together and is being disobedient to God's clear command (Heb. 10:24-25).
- Because we become unwise and foolish when we sanctify our disobedience (Eph. 5:15-17; Heb. 3:13).
- Because Jesus rose from the dead on Sunday (Matt. 28:1; Mark 16:9; John 20:1; 1 Cor. 15:4; Acts. 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2); therefore, *physically* meeting together was the established Biblical pattern of the apostles, original disciples, and early church in commemoration of the resurrection of Christ (Acts 2:1, 46; 14:27; 20:7-8; 1 Cor. 11:18, 20, 33-34; 14:23, 26).
- Because the Bible teaches that we should *visibly* come together (Acts 2:44) to meet and greet flesh and blood, not with people that appear on computer and TV screens and who have no idea we are present (1 Cor. 16:20; Phil. 4:21; 1 Thess. 5:26).
- Because we cannot fellowship with God's people when we are practicing social distancing from God's saints (Acts 2:42). Interpersonal relationships cannot be replaced by people on a screen!
- Because we cannot share the Lord's Table together (Acts 2:42; Matt. 26:26-27).
- Because we cannot corporately pray together (Acts 2:42; 12:12).
- Because we are expected to attend church to give and monetarily support the local assembly as God ordained (1 Cor. 16:1-2).
- Because we cannot admonish (*give encouragement or instruction*) to one another if we are not singing together (Col. 3:16).
- Because we are to stir up one another to live for God and do good works (Heb. 10:24).

- Because we can by our presence and interaction with others exhort or encourage them and be a blessing to all of God's saints (Heb. 10:25).
- Because you will receive reward for your commitment to church life and ministry and not lose reward you otherwise could have gained (2 Tim. 4:18; 2 John 8; Rev. 22:12).
- Because the day is approaching when Jesus will return and you should not want to be caught being lazy, an ex-church member, and ultimately be ashamed at His coming (1 John 2:28; Heb. 10:25).
- Because we cannot use our personal gifts for the Lord in a corporate setting when we stop attending a local church (1 Pet. 4:10; 1 Cor. 1:7; 14:12).
- Because we are to love God with all our hearts and should want to do what is right (Mark 12:30; John 15:15; 1 John 5:3).
- Because God expects us to be *visibly* present in church to give our money (1 Cor. 16:2).
- Because God requires faithfulness (1 Cor. 4:2).
- Because we are to seek first the kingdom of God and do the first works (Matt. 6:33; Rev. 2:5).
- Because online preaching does not keep us connected with God's saints but disconnects us from them and causes us to live in a glass house or bubble (1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12; 1 Thess. 5:26; 1 Pet. 5:14; 3 John 14).
- Because we need each other (1 Cor. 12:14-22).
- Because our excuses will not hold up at the Judgment Seat of Christ (Luke 14:18-20; 2 Cor. 5:10).
- Because Covid, the cares of this world, and other distractions should not indefinitely keep us from attending church (Mark 4:19) since our faith in God should be greater than are fears related to trials (Mark 11:22).

- Because we should obey God over the government and its unconstitutional mandates or dictates which might keep us from attending church (Acts 5:29).
- Because we are not a shut-in incapable of attending church for restrictive reasons when we do everything else during the week (Luke 9:60).
- Because there is always time to do God's will (Heb. 10:7; Eph. 5:17).
- Because we must put *facts* before *feelings* since our feelings can become distorted and cloud our discernment and judgment (Heb. 5:11, 14).
- Because we must walk by faith in God's ways and truth – not our own ideas and conclusions (2 John 4; Rev. 15:3).
- Because we should want to please God (John 8:29; 2 Tim. 2:4).
- Because we have allowed other gods (*personal pleasure, worldliness, fears, phobias, our wants, work, desires, and goals*) to control us and drive us away from God's House and His people (1 John 5:21).
- Because Jesus has commissioned us to be His followers which means to forsake all others in a priority sense (including family members who hold us back) and take up a cross and surrender to His will for our lives (Luke 14:26).
- Because as men you are to be leaders and set an example for your families by attending church regularly (Eph. 5:23; Josh. 24:15).
- Because as wives you are to be submissive and follow your husband's leadership role and attend church with him (Eph. 5:22).
- Because we are to possess relationships with a community of believers where we love one another (Rom. 13:8), honor one another (Rom. 12:10), and serve one another (Gal. 5:13), which is difficult, if not impossible to create online.
- Because we don't want to look back with regrets for missing God's best for our lives (Heb. 12:16-17).

- Because a real church does not merely consist of the presence of the Lord among a group of people (Matt. 18:20) but an assembly of saints which includes the physical presence of elders who are to teach and guide the flock (1 Pet. 5:1 – “elders among you;” 1 Tim.5:17; James 5:14).
- Because you should possess a consuming desire to be in God’s House and hear from Heaven – not in your living room and in front of a computer or TV screen (Ps. 27:4-6; 5:7; 84:10 – “in his temple;” “in the house of the LORD;” “in his tabernacle;” “into thy house” and “a doorkeeper in the house of my God”).
- Because you cannot give thanks to God for not attending church (Col. 3:17; 1 Tim. 4:4-5).
- Because you cannot glorify God when refusing to attend church (1 Cor. 10:31).
- Because you can cause other Christians to stumble when they see your own lack of commitment to God and Church (Romans 14:13, 21; 1 Corinthians 8:9, 13; 10:32).
- Because Jesus would not stay home from church (Heb. 7:26; John 8:29).
- Because if everyone else would think like you and not attend church – there would be no open churches – only closed churches (2 Cor. 2:11; Eph. 6:11).
- Because God’s purpose is that preachers are to preach to people – not empty seats (Acts 11:26; 20:8-9; 2 Tim. 4:2).
- Because God expects you to be a *member* and *supporter* of the *local church* – not an internet or TV church (Acts 6:1-4; 15:22; Rev. 2-3; 1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Corinthians 8:18-21; 16:2; 2 Cor. 9:7).
- Because we will lose our testimony as a Christian (1 Tim. 4:12; 3:7; Eph. 5:3).
- Because we should fear God and keep His commandments (Eccl. 12:13).

- Because we cannot possess true Biblical happiness and satisfaction when not following God's intended purpose for our life (John 13:17; James 1:23-25; Ps. 1:1; Rev. 22:14).
- Because you can fall into the trap of "consumerism Christianity" and "online church shopping" where you simply visit an online service, walk away, and don't serve, give, or participate in any sacrificial way, which can eventually destroy and eliminate the local light or testimony of a church (Rev. 2:5; 3:17).
- Because you can very quickly digress into the philosophy that church is "all about me" and forget that you are to be part of something larger than yourself and your computer or TV (Acts 12:12-17; 18:19-20).
- Because the general trend of watching an online church eventually results in losing your heart and desire to be with God's people in a local church gathering and setting (Acts 14:27; 15:30-31).
- Because God said that His people dwelling together in love and unity would be a witness to the lost (John 13:35; Psalm 133:1 – "to dwell together in unity").
- Because we are to be "members one of another" (Eph. 4:25) and not isolationists, helping and assisting each other in the church.
- Because spiritual disciplines and accountability can easily fall away (1 Cor. 9:24-27; Heb. 13:17).
- Because you only do what you really want to do (John 7:17; Josh. 1:7-8; 24:15; Phil. 2:13-14).
- Because God says, "Woe to them that are at ease in Zion" (Amos 6:1) or to update it for today: "Woe unto them that are at ease in their living rooms not participating in local assembly worship and life."
- Because we should not *compare* or *substitute* media preachers with local church preachers (1 Cor. 3:4; 1 Pet. 5:1).

- Because the danger of missing church is that soon you won't miss it (Psalm 84:10)
- Because an internet or TV preacher will not visit you when you are in the hospital (James 5:14).

Someone said:

"Church members are like automobiles -- they start missing before they quit."

There's going to be a time when we can't make it to church, but it should be the exception, not the rule. The tendency today is to isolate ourselves in front of electronics where we interact with a screen instead of each other. A clicker or mouse replaces a friendly hug, handshake, and face-to-face interaction with God's saints. Christianity is not, nor was it ever intended to be, lived in isolation. Togetherness was the key to early apostolic Christianity – together in the word, prayers, communion, and fellowship with the saints. Social distancing of the saints was unheard of in the early church and throughout the passing church centuries (1 Cor. 16:20; 1 Thess. 5:26). If you honestly believe that you can defiantly "socially distance" yourselves from the corporate gatherings of the saints and not be adversely affected, then you are only deceiving yourself. The Bible emphasis is not about "me" but "we."

Acts 16:5

"And so were the churches established in the faith, and increased in number daily."

This cannot happen virtually but only physically and locally in a church setting.

Acts 2:44

"And all that believed were together (not virtually but physically), and had all things common."

"Blest be the tie that binds
Our hearts in Christian love;
The fellowship of kindred minds
Is like to that above."

No less than 15 times, the book of Acts speaks of believers coming "together" physically and corporately (with flesh and blood) for the purpose of worship and prayer (Acts 2:44; 3:1; 14:27; 20:7). A little research reveals that the New

Testament has at least 30 "one another" commands. These commands instruct Christians on how they are to treat one another. If a church never gathers, it is difficult to carry out these commands. Isolationism is not living out true Christianity. We are meant to be engaged with each other and with God. But when we are online only, a lot of this will naturally stop happening. As the saying goes, out of sight, out of mind! To state it succinctly, online church is only a shadow of the Biblical church. It's not the real thing! The hybrid church, offering both digital and physical ministry, is here to stay, but this does not mean we should substitute real church attendance with a digital church service.

The truth is this, you will never replicate *virtually* the holy energy of God's presence when He moves among His assembled people (Acts 2:41-42; 2 Chronicles 7:3). You find something at church gatherings (physical meetings with God's people) that cannot be downloaded or duplicated from a website. Participation is transformational and it can't be done while sitting on your couch. When possible, God wants us to be physically present in church – not digitally.

We should not be misled into thinking that digital church is an equal swap for the flesh-and-blood corporate church. One cannot replace the other. Think about this for a moment. Jesus did not come digitally. He came physically. A digital preacher will not perform your wedding. He will not visit you when you are sick or perform your funeral. When Christ returns, He will resurrect us physically, not digitally.

While we are grateful for technology and how it helps the church share the Gospel, digital church cannot replace the physical church. They are not the same. For instance, on Sunday mornings, when it comes to the pastor and his teaching, there is a big difference between a pastor that is on a screen compared to a flesh-and-blood pastor you listen to on Sunday morning and talk to after the service.



Considering how online church services are becoming the new normal, I think many of the things God has called us to do as a church corporately, when we physically gather together, will become naturally more difficult and even easy to stop altogether. It's hard to believe that Christians are willing to assemble secretly in communist countries and put themselves at risk for love of the

Word and brethren, while some American Christians create excuses (Luke 14:18) for not coming to church, and are simply too lazy to attend church, or think church services are an inconvenience to them.

With new technology some Christians conclude that online church is more effective in meeting the needs of busy people. But more *efficient* does not mean spiritually *sufficient*. I'm not saying that God can't work through online services. Technology is a wonderful gift of God (James 1:17) and can be used to reach people that maybe we would never have the opportunity to reach with the Gospel otherwise. Live streaming can be a helpful tool for those believers in nursing homes, or someone who is truly incapable of attending a live service. However, for those who are simply seeking to fit their Christianity and church life into their busy lifestyles, or making excuses for not attending church onsite, they are robbing themselves of a heavenly blessing that can only be received corporately (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16; 2 Chron. 7:14).

As our culture becomes increasingly obsessed with safety and comfort, online church will likely become an excepted and even preferred concession. For some it has become the new normal. But those who are able to attend corporate worship but choose to embrace online streaming as their preferred worship mode, may soon discover that the compromise will prove more costly than the perceived benefit (Gal. 5:9). You cannot replace digitally and biblically the spiritual dynamics and blessing of local church ministry.

Someone said this regarding local church gatherings:

"We can long for the good old days, but those days are gone, or at least going."

This is a defeatist mentality when it comes to God blessing local church ministries. We need to think about the future, about our children and grandkids and cast a vision for them. God is not finished with the local church! He wants the church to continue to thrive. God has promised to bless His church. Jesus said in Matthew 16:18, "I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." This means the digitalized or internet church service will not prevail against it! No, church on the internet is not hell, but when it becomes a replacement for the local church and begins to destroy the local churches, it is no longer a tool of God but of Satan.

So, is a digital or cyber church the real church? Absolutely not! Online church is not the same as offline church.

Barry Jones, professor of Pastoral Ministries at Dallas Theological Seminary states: "This experience of church mediated entirely through technology is a pseudo experience of what the church is called to be."

This is true when we look at the Biblical data. Smartphones and social media should never change the Church and Christianity. If they have changed your life by keeping you from attending a local church, then you need to return to church this week, obey God, and receive the spiritual benefits of gathering together with God's saints. Many people talk about what they gain when surfing online churches, but they often forget what they lose by not attending an offline church.

Being online is not being in church! Digital ministry can never replace the biblical pattern of ministry which involves gathering together physically as God's saints. It's better, much better, to attend a local church offline. There is a vast difference between digital and real-life interactions. Digital is not a replacement for the real thing.

Psalm 84:10

"For a day in thy courts *is* better than a thousand. I had rather be **a doorkeeper in the house of my God**, than to dwell in the tents of wickedness."

Psalm 89:7

"God is greatly to be feared **in the assembly of the saints**, and to be had in reverence of all *them that are* about him."

Psalm 35:18

“I will give thee thanks **in the great congregation** (*where the saints gather together physically*): I will praise thee among much people.”

Hebrews 2:12

“Saying, I will declare thy name unto my brethren, **in the midst of the church** will I sing praise unto thee.”

God has always promoted corporate worship among the gathered saints which represent His people. The Lord wants us to corporately worship together as we congregate with God’s people (“among much people”). You cannot do this sitting at home in your pajamas in the living room watching church on the TV or internet. The original commands of physically gathering together with God’s people (Acts 1 Cor. 14:26; Heb. 10:25) cannot be jettisoned by watching church services virtually. As we have seen, the book of Acts speaks of believers coming “together” physically and corporately (with flesh and blood) for the purpose of worship and prayer (Acts 2:44; 3:1; 14:27; 20:7). We are to be together – not separated!

You are not “together” in the Biblical sense when you are sitting at home on your favorite lazy boy chair watching a church service on the Internet or TV. Interpersonal relationships within the local gatherings of the church are ordained by God. God’s original commands mean to physically come together and enjoy one another’s fellowship, encourage one another, and to corporately pray, worship together, giving thanks to God while “teaching and admonishing one another through psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs” in the setting of the God-ordained local churches (Col. 3:16).

Online church is only a silhouette of the offline church (the true gathering of God’s saints). Christians should be obedient to God and physically meet together to worship in God’s House (Heb. 10:25) sending up united prayers, praises, and thanksgivings to God, supporting the local church financially (1 Cor. 16:1-3), and being under the authority of the local church (Heb. 13:7, 17). **It’s not the use of the internet or TV church that is wrong, but the *abuse* of the internet and TV church.**

“Brethren, we have met to worship
And adore the Lord our God;
Will you pray with all your power,

While we try to preach the Word?
All is vain unless the Spirit
Of the Holy One comes down;
Brethren, pray, and holy manna
Will be showered all around.”

Now this is a real church meeting!