

Psalm 133

Scottish Psalter and Paraphrases, 1650

Behold, how good a thing it is,
and how becoming well,
Together such as brethren are
in unity to dwell!

Like precious ointment on the head,
that down the beard did flow,
Ev'n Aaron's beard, and to the skirts,*
did of his garments go.

As Hermon's dew, the dew that doth
on Sion' hills descend:
For there the blessing God commands,
life that shall never end.

April 3, 2020

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

Digital Church? Drive-in Church? What Should We Think?

Jeff Straub

We are living in unprecedented times, to be sure. On Friday, New York Mayor Bill DeBlasio suggested that all churches and synagogues who do not comply with the notice to suspend meetings could be forced to close... permanently. News has just come out that a prominent Florida pastor was arrested over the weekend for defying the order not to assemble. Who would have thought it would come to this in America? Seems like the First Amendment to the Constitution has already addressed this issue. These are uncertain times.

Even if your church has agreed to the voluntary closures (we have here at Fourth Baptist), the challenge of ministering to people and keeping churches "open" has presented a new set of problems. For example, churches are now offering online giving. In this digital age, churches have set up bill pay apps to receive donations. And why not? What's wrong with an app that allows you to simply deduct your gift, weekly, monthly, or periodically from your bank account? For the record, I gave my church an offering today because, despite the shutdown, the needs of the church still go on. Still, I don't like online giving to my local church because it seems to me that the Bible instructs us to think about what we will give (as each one purposes in his heart, so let him give, 2 Cor 9:7). Moreover, we are to *bring* our gifts as an act of worship. Online giving can be "thoughtless" but our giving should be purposeful. I understand that some will argue that online giving allows for regularity, anonymity, and ensures that the church work will continue. Agreed. But I will switch back to giving in the service as an act of worship rather than doing online giving once this crisis is over.

Giving is one thing. Doing *church* online is something else. Can we even do church online? Is this really possible? For the record, the pandemic has not been the start of online *church* meetings, and when the pandemic is over, they will not disappear. I imagine that the sheer convenience of these meetings will ensure they continue until the internet breaks or Jesus returns. I must confess, from time to time, my wife and I have enjoyed a service at Fourth Baptist remotely when we have been up on the North Shore. I occasionally listen to the preaching of my successor at Emmanuel Baptist in Windsor, Ontario, online. I am sure our seniors and shut-ins appreciate listening in when they cannot get out. What a great day in which to live.



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Having access to good preaching from around the world from the comfort of your living room, what could be better? Assembling with the Lord's people for fellowship and worship. The question of remote *church* is an important one. Can we have church as the Bible defines it digitally? If we really can, why not sell our buildings and use the money for missions! If we cannot do *church* digitally, are we doing wrong by having online services at all? Some churches are refusing to hold online meetings. Older pastors don't have the technological skills while others think that online services are misguided, if not completely unbiblical.

Before I address these questions, let's look at the Old Testament and the Temple. The Temple contained the central altar. It was only there on *that* altar that the sacrifices to God could be offered. The Jews, if they wanted to offer acceptable worship, had to journey to the central altar to worship. When divine judgment came and the central altar was razed, the Jews were left without a place where true worship could be performed. Moreover, the Jews were scattered in the Diaspora, making it nearly impossible to go to Jerusalem. So, they came up with the synagogue system. Jews met to carry out what they could do legitimately in the absence of the central altar. They could do some things at the synagogue but not others. The synagogues offered some opportunity but could not fully meet the need for Jewish worship. While the necessity of the synagogue may have been a consequence of Jewish intransigence and much of Jewish efforts were works of the flesh, neither Jesus nor the disciples had any problem using the synagogue system to promote the Christian message. They certainly didn't boycott it. Was it the Temple? Clearly not. Could it be used to convey biblical truth, even to deliver biblical sermons? Apparently.

In the same way, digital meetings offer Christians opportunities to hear the Word preached, perhaps sing some songs together, hear announcements of the needs of the assembly, and pray "together," etc. But you cannot have a digital *assembly*; *church* cannot be digital and still be *church*.

Part of what makes the church *church* is the "gathering of ourselves together," which clearly cannot be done digitally. Without corporate gatherings we cannot worship God corporately as the *church* was intended to do. There is an aspect of worship that demands a *gathered* multitude. We cannot do this digitally. Nor can we partake of the Lord's Supper digitally, despite creative attempts to the contrary. We share the communion meal together as an assembly. It is not a private ceremony; it is a corporate act that we should do regularly. We gather together to celebrate the Lord's death *until He comes*. How often we do this is a matter of Christian discretion—weekly, monthly, quarterly, yearly, occasionally. Personally, I think more is better. If I would hazard a guess, I think among Baptists, monthly is likely the most frequent pattern. But communion is rightly done *when the church gathers*. I've seen communion given to newly-weds. That's not biblical communion. We don't

have communion with our students. Communion is a gathered local church activity.

As Baptists, we hold to a symbolic and non-salvific meaning to communion. It doesn't *do* anything for us. We are no better for the partaking or no worse for not partaking. It won't save us. But it has spiritual benefit which comes from a *gathered* celebration. We unite around the Table in common *koinonia* (fellowship). Attempts to have communion digitally are efforts in futility. These attempts won't accomplish what is intended to be accomplished at the Table; they are *unbiblical*.

What about drive-in church? Some churches have been having people gather in their cars in the church parking lot while the meeting is broadcast over an FM channel. It's creative. But I'm not sure how it differs from digital attempts. There is no mutual edification, especially if we maintain social distancing. Moreover, I am not sure what more is accomplished with drive-in over digital. Both fall short of New Testament *ekklesia*.

So, should we stop online efforts? Why? They do provide teaching and encouragement. Our pastor preached a fine message from Psalm 23 last Sunday. These online labors offer some attempt at togetherness, even if it's not *church*. But, while we wait on the Lord to turn the virus to naught, and while we watch or participate in these online activities, we need to long for the day when we can gather again and do *church* as the Bible prescribes it. By all means, minister to the shut-ins with a digital feed. But don't think that this is *church*. It isn't, and I for one look forward to the end of all of this when we can again assemble *together* to worship our Great God!



This essay is by Jeff Straub, Professor of Historical Theology and Missions at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
