

Is “Online Church” Really Church? The Church as God’s Temple

— Ronald L. Giese, Jr. —

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Abstract: Many churches switched to streaming or recording their services during the COVID-19 crisis. This brought a question to the forefront: Can church be done online, not just in part but fully? This can’t be settled by the meaning of the Greek word ἐκκλησία. This article proposes that, though we should use technology in many ministry areas, “online church” is an expression that should not be used. First, one of Paul’s main metaphors for the church is the temple of God. And, in keeping with the literal temple of the Old Testament, and the eschatological temple of the future, this is a *place*, in the usual meaning of the word. That place now is the local church, gathered physically. Second, God did not create humans as disembodied souls. The soul *and* body are both critical in Christian anthropology, redemption, and ministry.

Can “church” be done by video? By distance? Or, since some would say this already started on a broad scale in March 2020, perhaps a better question is, “Is this church, or is it something different?” To the question, “Can there be an online or digital church?” some say no, not at all. Others say yes, but it’s not the same as “in-person” church, it’s only a “plan B,” and the norm is always physical gatherings. And a third group would say, “Oh yes, virtual church is just as much a church, but a different form of being and doing church—each has its pros and cons.”¹

A brief review of “church” is in order. There is the “universal church” (all believers of all time) and “local churches.” First Peter 5 is one place where both are seen, since there is one “chief shepherd”—Christ (v. 4)—over the whole flock (see also 1 Pet 2:25). Peter also reminds his audience that they have brothers in Christ in all the world (v. 9). Yet Peter encourages elders to “shepherd the flock of God among you” (v. 2; similarly Acts 20:28). Two unhealthy tendencies in evangelicalism are the rise of individualism, and indifference to the doctrine of the universal church. Giles noted this over twenty-five years ago, and if anything it is more true today, when he spoke of authors who have

imagined Jesus and Paul to be evangelists like Billy Graham, calling on people to make a personal and individual response of faith, and suggested that the church is where they

¹ For example, Jay Kranda writes, “Just because you don’t meet in person doesn’t mean discipleship has to decrease—it just may look different” (*State of the Online Church* [Houston: Vanderbloemen, 2019], 29).

will get help in living out their Christian life. The church is, of course, the local church as a voluntary association. The wider church is of no interest, because it in no way helps the individual.²

The local church has officers (Acts 13:1; 1 Cor 12:28), baptism as a sign of entry into the church, and formal gatherings. Therefore, the local church is more than a “house” or “household,” even though the New Testament uses familial terms for believers.³ The local church is people, not a building. And the people are the church both as they gather, and in-between the gatherings: “*Ekklesia* is both *the act of coming together* (to fellowship/to community) and the *group that comes together* (the fellowship/the community). The church is not only present in the worship service, but continues to be the church beyond the formal gathering.”⁴

It’s also worthwhile to look at the documents that emerged in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in part from the resurgence of belief in Scripture as the one, true authoritative source. Although church governance varied among the Reformers and Puritans, definitions of the nature of church are quite consistent. In the Augsburg Confession (1530), “The church is the assembly of saints in which the gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly” (article VII). Brief as it is, the Augsburg Confession also recognizes the need for a pure church, that the church monitors doctrinal aberration (article VIII, and scattered throughout the Confession). In the Westminster Confession (1646) the church is, similarly, where “the doctrine of the gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered, and public worship performed” (article XXV). In addition to preaching, and the administration of sacraments, a third area of accountability, or “purity,” is evident (Westminster Confession, article XXX). As Clowney summarizes when talking of these two centuries, “Three marks were defined in distinguishing a true church of Christ: true preaching of the Word; proper observance of the sacraments; and faithful exercise of church discipline.”⁵ The presence of Christ, by the Holy Spirit, constitutes the church. One result of that presence is instruction, and this is accomplished through the preaching and teaching of the words of God, the Scriptures.

The “online church” in our day, which existed even well before March 2020, claims to meet all these definitions and descriptions. Until now, churches in our day (physical churches, not online) didn’t think much about defining church, or consider online church as a substitute for regular church. The vast majority of believers, even where internet is accessible, reliable, and fast, still wanted to meet in person. The coronavirus pandemic of 2020, however, forced churches worldwide to temporarily close their (physical) doors. Questions that were, up to March 2020, just in the distant background (is Life Church online really a church?) are now front and center. We now have expressions like “online campus” and “online church.” Are these oxymorons that are true contradictions, like “paid volunteer” or “exact estimate”? Or are they, as most oxymorons are, literary devices that at first sounded odd, like “friendly fire” or “alone in a crowd,” but in time become so commonplace that we don’t think of them as oxymorons

² Kevin Giles, *What on Earth is the Church? An Exploration in New Testament Theology* (Eugene OR: Wipf & Stock, 1995), 19.

³ Young-Ho Park, *Paul’s Ekklesia as a Civic Assembly*, WUNT 2/393 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 101–2.

⁴ Harald Hegstad, *The Real Church: An Ecclesiology of the Visible* (Eugene OR: Pickwick, 2013), 16.

⁵ Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 101. This was not only true of Lutheran and Presbyterian, but Baptists, historically, as well. See Stephen J. Wellum and Kirk Wellum, “The Biblical and Theological Case for Congregationalism,” in *Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age*, ed. Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2015), 64.

on any level? Like how years ago we thought that “telecommuting” or “telehealth” didn’t make sense. But now they do. Many would say our culture has already reached that level for “online church,” and only stuck-in-the-muds take pause at wording like video, virtual, or online church.

Most Bible-believing churches will not lose people to Life.Church’s online church. Our church has a church plant that did not offer video recordings of its services before March 2020. Later that month they started streaming services. When restrictions were lifted months later and the church resumed physical services, they discontinued the online services. As far as we can tell membership remained intact. And this makes sense. It would take a lot for members to leave the relationships forged in church, all for the convenience of doing church at home on Sundays.

But many churches, throughout the pandemic, did not define terms for their people. And words have meaning. Words not only reflect assumptions and theologies, they result in actions and behaviors. One result of the pandemic, with the concurrent closing of physical doors and opening of internet doors, should be that pastors now answer the questions of what “church” is, and how it is done. Simple answers like, “church is a gathering,” will not do (more on this below). Furthermore, what do we communicate to visitors? Even visitors on our websites, or to our recorded (video or audio) messages? How many churches, in their first streamed service (or any streamed service), took a few minutes to define what church is, and in what sense streamed services were or were not church?

Think of the old worship services of Jerry Falwell or Jimmy Swaggart 40–50 years ago. They were complete services, with songs, announcements, and sermons. Yet here and there were reminders that these services were for those homebound, or those traveling who could not find a Bible-believing church nearby. Or for those who were already in a church on Sundays, yet wished to experience even more teaching, throughout the week. This is not unlike what Matt Chandler, lead pastor of The Village Church, does in many video services or teachings in our day. He starts by stating something along these lines: “Pray that this sermon, this resource, be used by God in conjunction with you belonging to a local church,” or “This is never meant to substitute God’s good plan for you to be in a community of faith where the Word of God is preached and proclaimed.”

If Life.Church, VR (Virtual Reality) Church, The Robloxian Christians (TRC, which claims to be a church at almost 20,000 members online), and others can be seen as a disruptor (in the field of disruption theory⁶) to the traditional manner—and delivery—of church, then what they are doing is communicating a different message: “our online church can *be* your church, in every sense of the word.” Some are even offering communion and baptisms with digital avatars. The thought is that these are symbolic anyway, so why do they need to be done physically? We should have a theologically-based answer for these emerging practices.

1. Two Approaches to Avoid

There are two approaches to avoid in this debate. This first is to make assumptions. Both sides, those who say that online church can be fully church, and those who say it cannot, operate under assumptions. Let’s start with Old School Ollie. Here is his main line of argument:

⁶ Clayton M. Christensen, Michael Raynor, and Rory McDonald, “What is Disruptive Innovation?,” *Harvard Business Review* (December 2015): 45–53.

The Greek word ἐκκλησία means an “assembly,” a “gathering.” It means “called out,” related to a group of people, which certainly entails “called in.” The New Testament expects the church to “come together” (1 Cor 11:18; 14:26), warns against neglecting such meetings (Heb 10:25), and pictures believers physically gathering to receive teaching, pray, break bread, and enjoy fellowship with one another (Acts 2:42, 46; 20:7). Therefore, what we’re doing with streaming services in this time of Coronavirus restrictions is a plan B, and we hope to discontinue it as soon as possible.

But there’s a counter to this argument. In the first century there was no such thing as video conferencing. To “gather” clearly was physical, because there was no other way to gather. Since there was only one way to gather in the first century, does this necessarily mean that, as time and technology progress, no other ways of gathering can be allowed? This may be true, but it can’t be assumed.

To give an example in another arena, when biblical authors talk about the written word, such as 2 Timothy 3:15, they are clearly referring to objects: usually a scroll of parchment (the skin of an animal). However, in our time and day, God’s Word can be electronic. What at first bothered pastors greatly—people looking at verses on their phones or tablets—is now commonplace. Very few pastors would say, “Paul was only thinking of what we call hard copies of God’s Word. You need to keep your phone in your pocket or purse and bring a real Bible.” In sum, just because Paul only envisioned people gathering physically, does not necessarily mean that is the only way of being and doing church. Again, it may indeed be. But we must demonstrate that, whether theologically, practically, or both—not assume it.

What about the other camp? New School Ned might respond to the above statement with this:

You can pray, encourage, confess, forgive, love, serve, and preach, all online. And you can have community online. It’s different than face-to-face, but not inferior. Bottom line is, we can *gather* online. And I do participate, not just observe. Sometimes more than I used to participate in Sunday morning services when sitting in a church.

The assumption here is twofold. First, the “one anothers” of the New Testament (like “serve one another,” “love one another,” “forgive each other,” and “encourage one another”) can be done online, and done online as fully or deeply as in person. The second assumption is that we can solve the debate by dealing solely with the word “gathering” or “assembly” (Greek ἐκκλησία). In fact, both sides can make the mistake of reducing the debate to the semantics of one word. Part of what prevents healthy dialogue at this point is that both sides think they’ve grounded their arguments in theology by engaging in a brief word study.

A second thing to avoid in this discussion is the “pros and cons” debate. For instance, Old School Ollie presents what he sees as a practical “pro” to his position: “You have to be physically present to do communion. And part of communion is being one church, together, seeing each other and encouraging each other.” New School Ned can offer two kinds of responses. First, he can simply counter: “Plenty of churches do just what you’re talking about, online. Someone leads, and each person or couple partakes in their home. Using Zoom, I see the faces of dozens of people in their homes.”

Or Ned can grant, for the time being, the practical point made by Ollie, and counter with what he sees as a “pro” in his own position: “Yes, I agree that communion is better in person. If we weren’t in this crisis and I had a choice, I would choose to do communion in our church building, with the whole church there in person. To change the topic though, there’s a real advantage to online church services on Sundays, in that we can offer comments, in a sidebar, to one another as we watch and respond to the

preacher. Listening is more active, not passive. In my old church, in physical services, it would have been rude to talk to the person next to me about the sermon, during the sermon.”

The way to move the discussion forward, and not in circles, is through biblical, historical, and systematic theology. Defining and describing what the church is and does involves more than a cursory word study. Much has been written on what the church is, but very little has been applied to the issue of online interaction. For example, Allison’s book, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church*, mentions the phenomenon of online church, but does not measure it against the New Testament’s metaphors and descriptors for the church. In this robust work of almost 500 pages, Allison addresses online church in less than two pages and considers “virtual church” a “trend toward noninvolvement in a church.”⁷ But proponents of online church would say they are very much involved in a church. Allison, in his defense of (physical) church, talks about an “actual, visible procedure of meeting together,” and quotes others who talk of Christians being “bound together.” But again, a proponent of online church would affirm all these things.

Another recent work attempting to apply theology to online church is Stephen and Mary Lowe’s *Ecologies of Faith in a Digital Age* (though the book deals more with education, and spiritual formation, than church per se). Instead of pros and cons, this book presents an extreme. *Ecologies of Faith* presents a dozen examples of where online education, fellowship, or discipleship is as good as, or better than, the same done in physical presence. Yet there are no real examples of physical presence being a preferred method of interaction. In fact, the authors quote an unpublished paper claiming that there is nothing inherently engaging about physical space.⁸

It seems that a middle ground is more objective and fair. There are things inherently engaging about physical space, and touch. A man and woman cannot conceive a child by purely digital means. Additionally, the New Testament expresses a longing for the second coming of Christ (2 Tim 4:8; Titus 2:13; Heb 9:28; Rev 22:17).⁹ And this is not just a longing to leave this world of sin, but a longing to be with Christ, physically. On the other hand, there are things inherently engaging, even superior, about digital interaction. I video conference with a believer in a closed country, thousands of miles away. This can only be done through digital tools.

A recent book at the other extreme is Jay Kim’s *Analog Church*. Throughout the book, in an opposite approach from Lowe and Lowe, he criticizes digital communication. There are a dozen examples of how digital interaction is too quick, too individual, too isolating, and too shallow. Occasionally there is a token nod to an advantage of digital tools: “digital technology affords us brand new opportunities to share the gospel, as well as encourage and challenge one another” (p. 97), but these are few and far between. And some statements are fairly emphatic, such as, “Transformation in the life of a church is always an analog experience, as we journey shoulder to shoulder with other people, gathering in real ways as real people,

⁷ Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 156.

⁸ Stephen D. Lowe and Mary E. Lowe, *Ecologies of Faith in a Digital Age: Spiritual Growth Through Online Education* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2018), 107.

⁹ Lowe and Lowe state that, since *koinonia* can be had with Christ now, there is no advantage in physical presence versus mediated presence: “There appears to be no indication in the New Testament that the fellowship the church enjoys with Christ now is somehow inferior to the fellowship the church enjoyed with him previously or will experience with him in the eschaton when we will be in his presence forever” (*Ecologies of Faith in a Digital Age*, 75). But just because *koinonia* can be experienced now does not mean that there is not a deeper level that awaits us.

to invite God to change us individually and collectively. We experience this transformation in a variety of ways ... but all of these ways are in some form or fashion, tangible and physical.¹⁰

Can transformation never take place as one person seeks to disciple another through video conferencing and other digital interactions? What if a single person becomes a believer in a closed country, with no other believers in the area, yet access to internet? Perhaps *church* doesn't occur digitally, but is any substantive discipleship out of the question as well?

In this debate, assumptions about word meanings are too simplistic. The sorting of practical pros and cons does not seem to advance the discussion, especially when some of these may change over time. What online ministry cannot replicate today may indeed be possible tomorrow. And what seems like a "pro" to online ministry may turn out to be a "con" in years to come. Finally, looking at only the "pros" of one's position, and the "cons" of the opposing viewpoint, seems to only polarize the two positions more.

Rather than what has been happening in the literature for the past decade, the richness of biblical and systematic theology should be explored: issues like temple, presence, and anthropology.

2. *The Temple and God's Presence*

Putting aside the present church age for the moment, and looking at the "before" and "after," does God meet with His people in a *placeless* manner? No. The location for that in the Old Testament was the tabernacle, and later Temple. It is only a small exaggeration to say that the temple was everything, in the worship of God's people: "In short, the Temple is a visible, tangible token of the act of creation, the point of origin of the world, the 'focus' of the universe."¹¹ N. T. Wright proposes,

The Temple, and before it the wilderness tabernacle, were thus heirs, within the biblical narrative, to moments like Jacob's vision, the discovery that a particular spot on earth could intersect with, and be the gateway into, heaven itself. In the later period, even synagogues could sometimes be thought of as meeting places between heaven and earth; how much more the actual Temple. The Temple was not simply a convenient place to meet for worship. It was not even just the "single sanctuary," the one and only place where sacrifice was to be offered in worship to the one God. It was the place above all where the twin halves of the good creation intersected. When you went up to the Temple, it was not as though you were "in heaven." You were actually there. That was the point. Israel's God did not have to leave heaven in order to come down and dwell in the wilderness tabernacle or the Jerusalem Temple.¹²

In the Old Testament God does not visit the Temple. He lives or dwells there (1 Kgs 8:13; the Hebrew **יָשַׁב** is used here for dwelling or living in the Temple just as it is for heaven later in the same chapter, vv. 39, 43, and 49).

This concept of the Temple as God's dwelling place continued even to the days of Jesus. Jagger qualifies this with the observation:

¹⁰ Jay Y. Kim, *Analog Church: Why We Need Real People, Places, and Things in the Digital Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2020), 96.

¹¹ Jon D. Levenson, "The Temple and the World," *JR* 64 (1984): 283.

¹² N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God 4 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 1:96–97.

It is true that no Second-Temple Jew thought they might ever perceive an enrobed deity personally sitting in the Holy of Holies. But the belief that God’s presence, though often unseen, actually dwelt in the temple, and that upon God’s entry to this temple he had produced smoke and thick cloud, was rooted in the conviction that God’s presence had intensified here, on Zion, the actual geographical intersection between heaven and earth.”¹³

That God chooses to locate in a place, even though of course no place can contain God, is true just as much *after* the church age, in the new heavens and the new earth. This is all the more interesting since, once the world as we know it ends, if God wanted to, he could jettison the concept of place completely. Is there a “temple” in the new heavens and new earth, more properly in the new Jerusalem (or is the new Jerusalem *itself* the temple)? The answer has to be both “yes” and “no.” Revelation 21:3 says that God will “tent/tabernacle” among men, and this certainly calls to mind the dwelling of God in the bodies of believers, and in the local church. Yet verse 3 also says that God himself is present among his people, as if he does not need a physical tabernacle. And of course, Revelation 21:22 says that the new city does not need a temple, since the Lamb is its temple.

At the same time, the new Jerusalem is laid out, with a river flowing from it, in ways intentionally linked with the temple in Ezekiel’s vision of Ezekiel 40–48. Why is the city-temple of pure gold? Because key parts of the Temple of Solomon were gold. Why are the dimensions of the city-temple the same (length and width and height)? Because the Holy of Holies, in the Temple, had that three-fold (cubic) equality. There are a dozen more parallels with Old Testament “temple” images or dimensions. G. K. Beale’s view, shared by others, that the new heavens and new earth, and the new Jerusalem, are one and the same,¹⁴ makes sense both in the genre of the book of Revelation (where it is clear that, at least in parts, we have the same event but looked at from a different perspective and with parallel imagery), while also removing contradictions. The main contradiction, in this case, is how the ungodly could exist outside the city (Revelation 22:15), yet still be in the new heavens and new earth. In sum, in Beale’s view, “new creation” = “new Jerusalem” = “God’s tabernacle,” and this “tabernacle” is the true temple of God’s special presence portrayed throughout chapter 21.¹⁵ As Kistemaker states, “If the entire city is the dwelling place of God, then there is no need for a special section reserved for the saints to meet God. The city itself has become the holy of holies.”¹⁶ It is interesting that some studies of the word ἐκκλησία, as used of the church, see strong links with the concept of *polis*, “city.”¹⁷

In fact, many theologians see a continuum between the church as God’s temple, and the eschatological temple. Wellum and Wellum summarize this well:

Those who place their faith in Christ are now citizens of the new, heavenly Jerusalem and have already begun to gather there. This is the point of Hebrews 12:18–29. In

¹³ Keith Jagger, “God’s Presence on Earth and Christian Holiness: A Reading of Luke’s Temple Theology in Luke 3.1–4.13,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 51.1 (2016): 122.

¹⁴ Gregory K. Beale, “Eden, the Temple, and the Church’s Mission in the New Creation,” *JETS* 48 (2005): 7.

¹⁵ Beale, “Eden, the Temple, and the Church’s Mission in the New Creation,” 25.

¹⁶ Simon J. Kistemaker, “The Temple in the Apocalypse,” *JETS* 43 (2000): 440.

¹⁷ “*Polis* and *ekklēsia* are intimately connected.... The assembled Christian *ekklēsia* is a manifestation of the heavenly city,” according to Korinna Zamfir, “Is the *ekklēsia* a *Household* (of God)? Reassessing the Notion of οἶκος θεοῦ in 1 Tim 3.15,” *NTS* 60 (2014): 515.

contrast with the Israelites who gathered at Mount Sinai under the old covenant (vv. 18–21), new covenant believers have already gathered to meet God at the “heavenly” Jerusalem (vv. 22–24). This heavenly Jerusalem is still future but in a profound sense is already here. As the church, we are already beginning to enjoy, by faith, the privileges of that city.¹⁸

What about the present age? I’ve heard proponents of online church say, “The Holy Spirit is not constrained by time and distance.” Very true. However, the real question is not whether God is constrained, as if he is not omnipotent, but whether he *chooses* to focus his presence and blessing in one place, or in one place during one time period. The Bible teaches that he does: past, future, and present. In the New Testament, Paul uses the word picture of a “temple” to talk both about the individual bodies of believers (1 Corinthians 6:19) and about the local body of believers, the church (1 Corinthians 3:16—Paul is speaking *to* a plurality here, and *about* the plurality, the “brothers”; 2 Corinthians 6:16—“we” are “the” temple; and also Ephesians 2:21–22). The idea of a figurative “temple” is not just in a handful of verses in Paul. Jesus and Paul use temple imagery (Jesus of his own body) throughout the New Testament, where we may easily miss the reference. Here are just a few examples:

- In Romans 12:1–2, verses very familiar to many evangelical Christians, the idea in verse 1 is that Christians are priests, doing a service of worship in a (figurative) temple. Many Christians grasp that the word “sacrifice” is figurative yet miss the larger picture.¹⁹
- In Romans 14:19, Paul writes, “So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another.” The phrase “building up” in English certainly does not make us think of architecture or construction; it’s one of those figures of speech that has truly shed its original word picture. However, the Greek is οἰκοδομή, based on οἶκος, “house.” The context in this part of Romans 14 is “clean” and “unclean,” clear references back to the Temple system and the laws of Leviticus. Further, the very next verse calls upon believers to not “tear down” what God has worked on. The verb καταλύω, “to destroy, demolish, throw down,” is used in the Gospels for the destruction of the Temple (Matthew 24:2; Mark 13:2; Luke 21:6).²⁰
- John 14:2 is another well-known verse for Christians: “In My Father’s house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you.” This is usually taken as a general promise: Our Father’s house is big, and Jesus will go and make a place just for me.” But the only other reference in John to a “Father’s House” is the Temple in Jerusalem (John 2:16). This is more likely a reference to the eschatological temple, the “place” where believers will worship God forever. God “preparing a place,” calls to mind back numerous references in the Old Testament, where this referred to the literal

¹⁸ Wellum and Wellum, “The Biblical and Theological Case for Congregationalism,” 56–57.

¹⁹ For temple imagery and connotations woven into the book of Romans, see Albert L. A. Hogeterp, *Paul and God’s Temple: A Historical Interpretation of Cultic Imagery in the Corinthian Correspondence*, BTS 2 (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 278–89.

²⁰ Most commentators don’t go into this depth for Greek οἰκοδομή. However, see Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1996), 859 nn. 61–62. Also, οἰκοδομή calls to mind the Temple, according to Nicholas Perrin, *Jesus the Temple* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 69.

tabernacle, and later Temple before it was built (1 Chron 15:1, 3, 12; 2 Chron 1:4; see also God choosing a “place” for His name, multiple times, in the book of Deuteronomy).²¹

- Although below I will look at one passage in 1 Corinthians and one in 2 Corinthians in which Paul mentions the word “temple,” a good case has been made that concepts associated with the temple occur throughout multiple chapters in both the Corinthian letters.²²

Also, by way of introduction, theologians have always recognized that God is present in different ways in different places (or in different kinds of people).²³ Most recognize at least three levels of God’s presence:

- Level 1: God is present everywhere. He is “omnipresent.” So even where there are no human beings, God’s presence is there (Psalm 139:7–12).
- Level 2: God takes up dwelling in a believer, by His Holy Spirit, once the person is a new creation, born again (1 Corinthians 6:19; John 14:16–18).
- Level 3: God takes up dwelling among His people, the local church, when they gather (1 Corinthians 3:16; 2 Corinthians 6:16; and Ephesians 2:21–22).

This means that God is present in the life of a believer in a *different* way than God is present, say, with the stars. And it also means that God is present in the corporate worship (by this I mean the physical gathering) of a local church in yet another *different* way, different than God being just present as each single person worships in the group. And we can add a fourth level to the three above: that when we see Jesus face to face, our corporate worship of him, as described at the close of the book of Revelation, will be on yet another level. Frame states that God is present in every place, and in holy places in a different sense:

This language does not mean that God’s power, knowledge, and freedom to act are greater in the holy places than elsewhere on earth. But we might say that in these places his presence is more intense and more intimate, and the penalties for disobedience are more severe. When God makes his dwelling in a place, that place becomes his throne. We show special deference to him there, and we come more aware of his power to bless or curse.²⁴

In terms of the “church as temple” metaphors in the New Testament, one missing differentiation in the discussion to date is the universal church versus the local church. As an example, some would say that since God’s people enjoy fellowship, and communion, by God’s Spirit, with all other Christians, and indeed with Christ himself, there is no necessity for a physical gathering.²⁵ It might be preferred, but not

²¹ Perrin, *Jesus the Temple*, 54 (he cites several commentators as well who hold this view).

²² Yulin Liu, *Temple Purity in 1–2 Corinthians*, WUNT 2/343 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013); see also Brian S. Rosner, “Temple and Holiness in 1 Corinthians 5,” *TynB* 42 (1991): 137–45, and J. Ayodeji Adewuya, *Holiness and Community in 1 Cor 6:14–7:1* (Eugene OR: Wipf & Stock, 2003).

²³ “*God is present in different ways in different places, ... God acts differently in different places in his creation,*” according to Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 175 (italics his).

²⁴ John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2002), 581.

²⁵ Lowe and Lowe, *Ecologies of Faith in a Digital Age*, 72–75, 219.

necessary. But this takes verses related to the universal church and applies them to the local church as well. A second missing differentiation is level 2 of God's presence (in the list above) from level 3. Similar to the lack of differentiation above, proponents of online church say or imply that since God's presence already exists with all Christians, it doesn't matter how they interact with one another.

Two mistakes are being made by blurring these two areas, one flowing from the other. First, commentators lump together all verses about the church as the "temple" or "house" of God. Corinthian believers as the "temple" in 2 Cor 6:16, believers in Asia Minor as the "spiritual house" in 1 Peter 2:5, and the "house of God" in Hebrews 3:6 and 10:21 are all seen as synonymous: the church is the new "temple" of God, and "house of God" always means temple.²⁶

This in turn leads to a second mistake. If believers individually are the "temple" of God, then just like Peter wrote to believers all over Asia Minor, current-day video can certainly function as church to Christians either scattered by choice or by necessity ("shelter in place" due to a contagious coronavirus). And God's presence in His people, collectively, can exist in a church gathered by video.

I propose that the term "house/household," spoken of the church, functions in a fluid manner: it usually applies to both the universal and the local church. Jesus is Lord, the son of inheritance, and high priest over this house. This is not so much a house that God dwells in, but a house that Jesus is over. And it may or may not refer to the Temple. Two letters teach us this sense: the letter to the Hebrews, and the book of 1 Peter.

2.1. Hebrews and 1 Peter

In Hebrews 3:6 we as believers are a "house" (οἶκος). Jesus is the "son" over the house. The parallel is drawn with Moses, who was not a "son" but God's "servant," and who didn't have a literal house, but certainly had a people that God entrusted to his care. In Hebrews 10:21 Christ himself is the great priest over the "house" (οἶκος) of God. In keeping with the more general and homiletical genre of this book (a sermon meant to be heard by many churches), the "house" in both places is not clearly defined: it can be taken as a local church, or the universal church. This is affirmed by the context of each passage. In 3:6 believers are the "house" of Christ himself, not part of a house of undershepherds or overseers who serve under the authority of Christ. F. F. Bruce says, "If the household of God in which Moses served him so loyally was the people of Israel, what is the household of God today, over which the Son of God bears rule? That household comprises all believers."²⁷ Similarly in 10:21 there is one high priest, Jesus, over the whole "house" of God. Attridge brings both passages together. Starting with Hebrews 3:6:

The author now exploits a different metaphorical sense of the term "house," taking it not as the universe, but as that sacral community over which Christ presides as the "great High Priest" (10:21). Moses can meaningfully be said to be "in" that community because it extends to the faithful of old who were evangelized (4:2), who exemplified faith (chap. 11), and who are "perfected" with the members of the new covenant (11:40).²⁸

²⁶ See, for example, Wellum and Wellum, "The Biblical and Theological Case for Congregationalism," 59–60; Clowney, who says that 1 Peter 4:4–6 is a temple just like 1 Corinthians 3:16 (*The Church*, 46); and John S. Hammett, who says that "house" in 1 Peter 2:5 is a synonym for temple (*Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005]: 45).

²⁷ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, revised ed., NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 94.

²⁸ Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Herm (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 111.

We also find the term “house” used for the church in 1 Peter 2:5. 1 Peter was written to churches in Asia Minor, with particular struggles, such as persevering in the faith, in mind. But what Peter says to his audience can often be applied to any believer, regardless of geography or time. A major aim of 1 Peter is to teach Christians (both congregations and individuals) in Asia Minor about their identity. Identity both in general (believers in Christ, who are both Jewish and Gentile), and in particular, that is, what it means to have an identity as one who suffers. There is more about identity in this letter, by far, than in many of Paul’s epistles. Karen Jobes opens her commentary by stressing the letter’s “universal relevance,” and she later specifies, “There is probably no more sweeping concept for a new identity than the concept of rebirth that Peter introduced in 1:3.”²⁹ A well-known example of identity, which is not just for Peter’s audience but for all believers, is 1 Peter 2:9, where the believers are called “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession” (citing Exodus 19:6 and Isaiah 43:20–21). Clearly, terms that once referred to Israel, an ethnic people, are now used of a spiritual people of God, those part of the new covenant inaugurated through the atonement of Christ, now composed of Jew and Gentile.

Within this context is the metaphor of God’s people as a “spiritual house” (οἶκος πνευματικός) in 1 Peter 2:4–5:

And coming to Him as to a living stone which has been rejected by men, but is choice and precious in the sight of God, you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

This is not something the believers in Asia Minor are becoming. It is what they are; it is part of their identity: “the phrase οἶκος πνευματικός is the nominative and thus should be translated not as the result of being built up but in apposition to the subject: ‘You, who are a spiritual house, are being built up to be.’”³⁰ In other words this is a word picture for the identity of these believers just like “chosen race, royal priesthood, and holy nation” in 2:9.

In sum, we cannot assume that “house” in these passages is synonymous with “temple” in Paul’s letters. It may be one of several metaphors for the universal church, all of which can apply to local churches, and indeed individual Christians: each believer is part of a house, a “son” or “daughter,” and indeed works together with others in the house. And of course, in 1 Peter this is not just a house, but a spiritual house. But we should not go so far as to say that the “spiritual house” in 1 Peter 2:5 is the temple, one in which the Lord dwells.³¹ The spiritual house is “for a holy priesthood.”³² The “house” here is analogous to saying, “The house of MacLaren is here.” Meaning the *people*, the clan, of MacLaren has arrived, not the castle or manor in which the chieftain dwells. The emphasis is on believers as priests, what they offer to the Lord. In contrast to this will be verses in Paul’s letters, where the “temple” is the location where God “dwells.”

²⁹ Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 1, 142.

³⁰ Lewis R. Donalson, *I & II Peter and Jude*, NTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 60.

³¹ John H. Elliott makes a good case for the οἶκος πνευματικός not being the temple in *The Elect and the Holy: An Exegetical Examination of 1 Peter 2:4–10 and the Phrase Basileion Hierateuma* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1966), 157–59.

³² Similarly in 1 Tim 3:15: “Paul never uses οἶκος θεοῦ for the *ekklesia* ... commentators of 1 Tim 3.15 agree that οἶκος θεοῦ is first of all the *household* of God.” Zamfir, “Is the *ekklesia* a *Household* (of God)?,” 518.

2.2. 1 Corinthians

Turning to Paul's letters, we encounter a different term. Instead of "house" (οἶκος), he uses "temple" (ναός). This refers to the actual sanctuary itself, where God dwells (for instance, it would not have included the Court of the Gentiles in Herod's Temple complex). The Greek ναός is used for the church in 1 Cor 3:16, 2 Cor 6:16, and Ephesians 2:21. The apostle writes in 1 Corinthians 3:16–17,

Do you not know that you are a temple of God and *that* the Spirit of God dwells in you?
If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is
holy, and that is what you are.

In 1 Corinthians 3:16 this is the local congregation. It is not a fluid concept of universal and local church. The context immediately previous is the "foundation" and "work" (1 Cor 3:5–15) of church planters like Paul and Apollos, at Corinth. The "building" (οἰκοδομή) in verse 9 is the church at Corinth. The broader context argues for the local church as well. In chapters 2–4 Paul addresses the "brothers" (1:10, 11, 26; 2:1; 3:1; 4:6), and in each instance these are clearly believers at Corinth. Anecdotes and conflicts are brought up such as divisions, Paul's history with the church, and the maturity (or lack thereof) of the believers at Corinth.

The teaching of 1 Corinthians 3:17 is a key factor as well in determining whether this is the local or universal church: "If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are." The "house" of Hebrews 3 and 10, and 1 Peter 2 (see above) cannot be destroyed. The "priesthood" of believers cannot be destroyed. To do so would almost be paramount to destroying God himself, since this is the people whom he chose, bought with the blood of Christ, and keeps. Certainly, individuals can fail to persevere, and thus show themselves to be of a faulty seed to begin with (the argument of Heb 6:7–8). But the "house of God" in this sense (the fluid sense that can be applied to both local and universal church) cannot be destroyed. A local church, on the other hand, *can* be destroyed. It can be scattered, divided, and embroiled in conflict, and some of this comes up in the letters to the Corinthians. Indeed, it seems in both these letters, that church is not far from destroying itself:

As God's temple in Corinth, the church was to be his alternative to Corinth, both its religions and vices. But the Corinthians, by their worldly wisdom, boasting, and divisions, were in effect banishing the Spirit and thus about to destroy the only alternative God had in their city.³³

2.3. 2 Corinthians

In 2 Corinthians 6:16, it may be less clear that the "temple" (ναός) is the local church. After all, the previous verse teaches that a believer (one person) should not be bound with an unbeliever, reminding us of the end of 1 Corinthians 6.³⁴ The apostle writes this in 2 Corinthians 6:14–18:

³³ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 148.

³⁴ "Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you?" (1 Cor 6:19). Though some have attempted to interpret this (1 Cor 6:19) as a corporate "body," i.e., the congregation, these arguments fall flat. Gupta is on the right track here when he argues that though in Paul's mind the individual and community were much more linked than in our minds and culture, the primary meaning here is the human body. Nijay K. Gupta, "Which 'Body' Is a Temple (1 Corinthians 6:19)? Paul beyond the Individual/Corporate Divide," *CBQ* 72 (2010): 525–27.

Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? Or what harmony has Christ with Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; just as God said, “I will dwell in them and walk among them; And I will be their God, and they shall be My people. Therefore, come out from their midst and be separate,” says the Lord. “And do not touch what is unclean; and I will welcome you. And I will be a father to you, And you shall be sons and daughters to Me,” says the Lord Almighty.

Paul’s argument proceeds like this: You all (believers in the church at Corinth), do not be bound with unbelievers (v. 14). For “we” (plural) are the “temple” (singular), v. 16.³⁵ Furthermore, the illustration of that corporate identity, in the verses that immediately follow, is the people of Israel: God dwelt in them (v. 16), and they (plural) were to separate themselves from what was unclean (v. 17). As Martin notes, “It appears that the ναὸς θεοῦ, “temple of God,” is meant in a corporate (1 Corinthians 3:16), not individualistic sense (1 Corinthians 6:19). This can be seen in the OT verses that follow.”³⁶ Again, we have very strong terms linked with the temple of the Old Testament: God “dwells in them,” the local church (instead of “dwelling in it,” the temple).

Is Paul saying that the church is *like* a temple or that it *is* a temple? Is this a soft metaphor, in a list of many, for the church? Or is it a significant metaphor used for the church, one of the more core, defining ones? Beale argues convincingly for the latter, that here, in large part based on the intertextuality of Leviticus 26:11–12 and Ezekiel 37:26–27 (and other passages), cited by Paul in 2 Corinthians 6:16–18, the local church as God’s temple is the start of the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies of an eschatological temple.³⁷ Fee states that “temple” is one of Paul’s three most important metaphors for the church: “The centrality of the Spirit to Paul’s view of the believing community emerges especially in his three major images for the church (family, temple, body); the first two of these also reflect continuity with the Old Testament.”³⁸

2.4. Ephesians

Paul’s third and final use of “temple” (ναὸς) for the church is in Ephesians 2:19–22:

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God’s household, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, in whom the whole building,

³⁵ As I. Howard Marshall says, “Here the group of Christians is regarded as a shrine inhabited by the Spirit,” in “Church and Temple in the New Testament,” *TB* 40 (1989): 213.

³⁶ Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 2nd ed., WBC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 367.

³⁷ Beale, “Eden, the Temple, and the Church’s Mission in the New Creation,” 23–24. See, in more detail, G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, NSBT 17 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004), 253–56.

³⁸ Gordon D. Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1994), 873. In agreement that these three are Paul’s three central images for the church are J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *God’s Relational Presence: The Cohesive Center of Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 242; and Hammett, though he words the three as “people of God, body of Christ, and temple of the Spirit” (*Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 31).

being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.

The “you” of v. 19 is the Gentiles mentioned in v. 11, and this is the same “you” of v. 22. The term “household” in v. 19 is not exactly the same as the “house/household” in Hebrews and 1 Peter 2:5 mentioned above. The term used here in Ephesians 2 is not οἶκος but οἰκεῖος, a much less used word than οἶκος (οἰκεῖος only occurs three times in the New Testament). There is no overlap with a temple sense here. The idea in this last part of verse 19 continues the beginning thought. The verse started with an illustration of citizenship in a city or state. Gentiles who believe in Jesus are fellow citizens. Not foreigners, and not even resident aliens. The verse ends with an illustration of a larger house, where one can envision children, extended family, household managers, and servants, paid and unpaid. Bruce notes,

If the community is viewed as a house or household, the Gentile believers are full members of the family—not household servants but sons and daughters, with all the rights of inheritance that sons and daughters enjoy. The Father to whom they have access is the same Father as he to whom their brothers and sisters of Jewish origin have access—it is by the same Spirit that his Gentile and Jewish children alike acknowledge him as their Father.³⁹

These metaphors, unrelated to the temple, are added to another metaphor unrelated to the temple, that of a new humanity in v. 15. In fact, these metaphors go hand-in-hand with others in the book, such as “fellow heirs” in 3:6, and one “body” where the parts are fitted together in 4:16. The topics of unity is, of course, a major point woven throughout the book of Ephesians. There is “one” body and one hope of their calling (4:4), just like there is one Spirit, one Lord, and one God and Father over all (4:4–5). It is well recognized that nouns and verbs with the Greek prefix *sun*, “with,” figure prominently in the book of Ephesians. These contribute further to the concept of unity: in English, verbs that are translated with phrases like, “being built together,” “fitted together,” and “held together,” and nouns like “fellow citizens,” “fellow members,” and “fellow participants.”⁴⁰

Following this is God’s “temple” (v. 21), his “dwelling place” (v. 22). The imagery of the temple is much stronger than the “house” imagery in Hebrews or 1 Peter. These are simply two different images, for two different purposes, even if 1 Peter 2 has some overlap with temple imagery. In 1 Peter 2, the focus is on Christ, as a particular “stone,” and also on Christians, as “stones” and also “priests.” Peter is out to teach how believers and their God relate to each other, using temple imagery. The reason is that he wants them to “grow in respect to salvation” (1 Peter 2:2). This continues Peter’s teaching on the gospel and how it transforms believers, which started in the first chapter (verse 3). Peter is not out primarily to teach ecclesiology, but rather Christology and the effects of salvation, and the identity that believers have from, in, and through Christ. And one of many metaphors is the temple (for Christ) and the priesthood (for believers). Speaking of 1 Peter 2, Elliott says,

This Spirit transfigures the βασιλείαν and ἱεράτευμα of the Old Disposition into a House-(hold) in which He resides, into a Body of Priests which He sanctifies.... The

³⁹ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 303.

⁴⁰ A great summary of the topics of unity in the book of Ephesians is found in Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 102–4.

reality of what this community is (living stones, house-(hold), body of priests, chosen race, holy nation, people of God’s possession) and what she does (the leading of a God-pleasing life of witness and the proclamation of His might deeds) is grounded in the reality concerning Him to Whom this community commits herself: Jesus as the Christ, the eschatological Bringer of the Spirit.⁴¹

Paul, on the other hand, in these three passages above, *is* out to teach ecclesiology.

3. Reflections on Place

Part of the biblical theology of “temple” is that in all three periods—the time before Christ, the new covenant, and new Jerusalem—God’s presence, even though everywhere, dwells in a different, deeper, special sense in a *place*. In these “last days” (taking this expression as the days from the first coming to the second coming), that place is the local church. And in these passages in Paul God’s new “temple” is the local church and not the universal church.

The idea of place prompts a question regarding online church. Granted, online church *uses* the same terms that the physical church uses. As a striking example, VR Church (Virtual Reality), pastored by DJ Soto, is entirely digital. He talks about “their current church building” or the ribbon cutting for “their new church building.” But if Lord’s presence is in a place, then in a digital church where is that *place*? Is God’s presence within the monitor or screen, or between the screen and each believer? And if so, then with 800 screens, if there are 800 separate places of God’s presence, spread out possibly over the whole world? Yet this is little different than saying God’s presence is in every believer (the second of the three levels mentioned above, but not the third, which is his presence in the church as it gathers). By more than one definition, a physical service is in one place. It is categorically different than a new definition of “place” in cyberspace, where the “place” is actually spread out over 800 locations.

4. Humans Are Embodied Souls

A second area of theology can be introduced with this question: To what extent can a disembodied soul (a digital presence) engage in the interactions between believers that Jesus and the apostles like Paul and Peter commanded and envisioned? To start with, the concept of God dwelling in a human body, an individual believer (1 Corinthians 6:19; John 14:16–18), and the concept of God dwelling in a local church, are likely more connected than we at first imagine. Granted, if a church is scattered and not communicating, God is present in the first sense and not the second. However, the New Testament teaches that when God is present in his temple, the local church, then people interact with one another. And they interact even in ways that they would not if they simply met one-on-one in a coffee shop or home.

One place where this concept is seen is Ephesians 4–5. That the local church is in mind throughout these chapters is seen in illustrations like the “body” (where Paul means the assembly, not the human body of one person) in Ephesians 4:4, 12, and 16. In this sense Ephesians 4 is similar to Romans 12, another chapter that is about the local church (“body” in this sense is found in Rom 12:4–5). In Ephesians 4 Paul mentions the “head” of the church, Christ (4:15). Ephesians has several “one another”

⁴¹ Elliott, *The Elect and the Holy*, 222.

statements, one of the strongest indications that a local church is in mind (4:2, 15, 25, and 32). And of course we have the gifts to the church in Ephesians 4:11. Although some commentators see a change of topic starting in 5:22—away from the church to the topic of husbands and wives, followed by two other specific relationships: children and parents, and slaves and owners—this is really a continuation of the discussion of the church. The church is still in Paul’s mind right up to this point (see the “one another” statements of 5:19 and 21). And the husband-wife relationship is discussed using the illustration of the church! Children, and slaves, likewise are said to have a parallel with the spiritual “head” of the body of Christ: how they treat those in authority above them is a direct reflection on how they treat the Lord. Marriage counseling, therefore, should not start with Ephesians 5:22, but rather with the teaching of the local church in ch. 4 (or better yet, Ephesians 1).

All this is to question the extent to which the “one anothers” are done in an online church. Can the vast majority of them be done? We would have to say yes, other than a couple “one anothers” like “Greet one another with a holy kiss.” But the real question is, again, to what extent? We are not disembodied souls.⁴² We were not created that way, as humans, in the garden of Eden. And we will not be disembodied souls in the New Jerusalem. Even though Paul used letter-writing as a supplement to in-person church planting and leadership development, he himself admitted this was no substitute. In over a dozen places Paul expressed his longing to minister in person.⁴³ Christ and the apostles taught that God created both body and soul, and will redeem the body after death (see especially 1 Cor 15). In no small part, as we minister one to another, we minister to both body and soul. And even this is not to say that these are mutually exclusive targets, that we offer food or medicine when needed, and then at other times we offer the gospel and Word-based counsel and teaching to the soul.

The book of Psalms is one of many places to witness the interrelation of body and soul. The psalmists constantly saw the interrelation between these two. An arrow piercing the body, or words used to insult, did not just do violence to the body, or mind. There was always, necessarily, a spiritual component. Is Psalm 31 about physical, emotional, or spiritual attack and hurt? The answer has to be yes, all of them:

Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress;
 My eye is wasted away from grief,
 my soul and my body *also*.
 For my life is spent with sorrow
 And my years with sighing;
 My strength has failed because of my iniquity,
 And my body has wasted away. (vv. 9–10)

⁴² Lowe and Loew claim that we should not refer to online communication as disembodied (*Ecologies of Faith in a Digital Age*, 79, 107). Of course we do not leave our bodies behind when we engage in online learning or church. But functionally, our physical bodies have no part in that communication.

⁴³ See, for instance, Romans 1:9–15, 1 Timothy 3:14; 2 Timothy 1:4; 4:9, 21; Philippians 2:24. Also Paul not only sends letters, but wants messengers to, in person, convey his love and care (Eph 6:21–22; Phil 2:19, 26; Col 4:7–9). In Philemon Paul talks specifically about the important of face-to-face presence (Phlm 10–16). Paul says that in sending Onesimus back to Philemon, Paul is sending his own heart. Paul longed for Onesimus to stay with him, since Onesimus ministered to Paul’s needs. And Paul ends (v. 16) by actually stating the primacy of the fellowship of Onesimus, as both “in the flesh and in the Lord.” And as with other letters, Paul longs to see Onesimus himself, in time (v. 22).

Similarly, Psalm 32:3–5 describes David’s harm as self-inflicted—it starts with sin, but spreads holistically to every part and parcel of his being:

When I kept silent *about my sin*, my body wasted away
Through my groaning all day long.
For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me;
My vitality was drained away *as* with the fever heat of summer. *Selah*.
I acknowledged my sin to You.

As Sayles reminds us,

Humans *are* souls, more than we *have* souls; it is not so much that we *have* bodies as that we *are* bodies. All of our experiences, whether we call them intellectual, emotional, or spiritual, are also and always, *physical*. They travel across through our skeletal, chemical, vascular, muscular, glandular, respiratory, neural, electrical, and digestive systems; they fire across the synapses of our brain, and they register and store themselves somewhere in our bodies.⁴⁴

This all has practical implications. When people listened to Jesus, was it truly two-dimensional only? That is, was it only hearing and seeing? I’m talking about people that were still thirty feet away, so I’m not thinking of touch as an added sense. When nurses and counselors write about presence, they admit to aspects that occur in physical presence that are absent in distance communication. And educators talk about the chemistry of a class, in residence, that is different than that of a distance class, even if the distance class has tools for students to digitally interact with each other. In gospel accounts we read about Jesus doing much more than speaking. And again, I’m not talking about the sense of touch, or healing by touch. Rather he went through experiences with people, experiences that cannot be replicated by video and messaging interactions on a screen.

Although this is certainly anecdotal, I’ve heard stories from church and family of the failures of matchmaking by media. Pay for a service, fill out an inventory, and then request, or grant permission for, an online dialogue to begin. Weeks and even months go by in the dimension of messaging or chatting, and possibly video. But then the two meet face-to-face. They go through experiences together in person. New dynamics are introduced into the relationship. Sometimes these shatter the relationship, sometimes physical experiences strengthen the digital relationship. Either way, invariably those involved admit the limitations of online communication. Journalists who examine such interactions often note that, consciously or unconsciously, the internet allows us to how, when, and what constitutes the face that we present:

Scholars have gone so far as to suggest that individuals engaged in interactions on the Internet gain the ability to become “disembodied,” i.e., they can create alternative identities unbounded by physical constraints or social boundaries (e.g., race, social class). To put it another way, online identities are oftentimes not authentic, but performative.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Guy Sayles, “Preaching Incarnation, Incarnational Preaching: The Witness of Limitation,” *RevExp* 114 (2017): 221.

⁴⁵ Felipe G. Massa, “Guardians of the Internet: Building and Sustaining the Anonymous Online Community,” *Organization Studies* 38 (2017): 962.

DJ Soto (and his Virtual Reality Church) would say that his experience is the opposite, that people are *more* authentic and vulnerable when they are in his digital church. But this alone is an odd dynamic to contemplate. People without bodies, and more to the point people with an avatar, which looks smooth, clean, and attractive (whether made to look like a robot, or a human), are still all about their souls. “Church,” if we can call it that, has become disembodied. In virtual reality (avatars), church now has *different* kinds of bodies, ones created by us, not God.

True, sometimes people who are physically at church on Sunday are often not “real,” “authentic,” or “vulnerable.” They can put on nice clothes, a smile, and a performance. The point is simply this: even for those who try their best to be authentic online, or even for those who try their best to hide their real self on Sunday in a church building, we learn so much more, on different levels, when we enter a person’s home, or serve the poor with them, in person. As the early church father Chrysostom pointed out,

Those who lead a retired and inactive life have their solitude as a cloak for their private faults; but when they are brought into public life, they are compelled to strip off their retirement like a garment and to show everyone their naked souls by their outward movements.⁴⁶

Most of the “one anothers” simply cannot be done, to their fullest extent, in a digitized format. It’s interesting that Christian colleges and seminaries are looking, anew, at their educational goals. For the past twenty years, schools have hopped on the bandwagon of distance education, even offering entire degrees online. Yet now discussions are taking place on whether we’ve gone too far: whether mentoring students in some of the upper levels of Bloom’s taxonomy (levels such as creating, evaluating, or applying) should be pulled back, at least in part, to in-person dialogues. Rachael Starke, a longtime advocate of using online tools, notes,

The Christian life, in other words, can never be fully digitized. This reality is ... prompting some seminaries to adjust their programs accordingly—not by embracing the brave new world of digitally driven collaboration and education, but by resisting it.⁴⁷

The only reason such a dialogue exists in our time and day is that, after over twenty years of claims that distance education can, across-the-board, be comparable in achieving learning outcomes, we are only now realizing that this is not true.

Finally, we have the example of Jesus himself. God the Son came to earth bodily. The atonement required it. Jesus remains as the example par excellence of the importance of both body and soul. And this is true not just in atonement—receiving the wrath of God in a holistic sense (not one part of his humanity at the exclusion of others)—but in his ministry. To give just one example of how Jesus related to people as being with them, where they lived and worked, notes Perrin’s word choice of “enmesh”: “Jesus neither taught about the poor as an abstraction nor gave to them as from a distance: he was socially enmeshed with them as a class.”⁴⁸ Now we could debate the last part of that sentence. And for us as believers, certainly there has been a valid critique of “incarnational ministry” in the last twenty

⁴⁶ John Chrysostom, *Six Books on the Priesthood* 3, cited in Matthew Levering, ed., *On the Priesthood: Classic and Contemporary Texts* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 31.

⁴⁷ Rachael Horner Starke, “Internet or Incarnation? Bridging the Digital Divide,” *Christianity Today* 64 (May 2018): 83.

⁴⁸ Perrin, *Jesus the Temple*, 120. Similarly, on p. 134, “As far as Jesus was concerned, it was not enough to give to the poor: *being* ‘with the poor’ seems to have been the group’s standard practice.”

years.⁴⁹ The point is that, with many of the “one another’s” of the New Testament, we only fully, as well as holistically, serve or love a person or group in person. If we are forced into a limitation, such as serving fellow believers in China, then of course we have to settle for whatever it is we can do. And perhaps “settle” is far too weak a term. We can do immense good for people through digital tools and media. We can teach, encourage, warn, and yes, disciple. But not as robust as in an in-person relationship. We might even say that in many cases a hybrid method, both physical and online, is best. But not a purely digital one.

Let me offer a personal story. Many years ago, when our church started partnering with the Mayan Achi, in the highlands of Guatemala, we started serving a remote village called Chichalom. Later in our relationship, one way in which we served the village was to construct a pipeline and purification system, so that they could have pure water. This led to a significant reduction in water-borne illnesses, many of which were painful, and recurring. In one of our earliest medical clinics, one of the leaders from our church suggested that we stay overnight, on the edge of the village. The location was where we could hold the clinic the next day, in an adobe hut, with a dirt floor, and open to the outdoor air. Usually our team would stay overnight in a hotel over the mountain in a small town with all the amenities of heat, electricity, and hot water. This was January, and in the mountains, and even in down sleeping bags it was cold!

This was not being “enmeshed” with the Achi. Nor was it incarnational ministry. But what was then a young boy, just observing us, told me ten years later that this act of physical presence—and presence more than a few minutes or even hours—was extremely meaningful to him and his family.

5. Open to Learning

Most of this article has been a critique of the term, and concept, of online church. However, Old School Ollie has much to learn. Up to this point his church has been entirely physical, with a service audio posted online each week as a supplement to, not a part of, the church. That audio is meant for those who missed church that Sunday, or who attend other churches but want to supplement their intake with other Bible-based teaching.

What started for Ollie’s church in March 2020 was a tectonic shift. Though no one was looking to replace physical church with online church, pastors across the country, and world, now sought to do go online with many of the things that a church does. As one example, in terms of home groups, community groups, and Bible studies, it was extremely rare that any church took these online before March 2020.⁵⁰ There was no need. And when restrictions started to ease in summer 2020, many churches dropped Zoom as quick as they picked it up. However, in the minds of especially younger generations, in the absence of theological mooring, “church” no longer has to be tethered to a physical place, and set times. What occurred to tens of thousands in our country before March 2020—that church could be done fully online—is now occurring to millions. Ollie can return to the way it was before COVID-19. But some of his people may question why he abandons the tools of online communication, outreach, and fellowship

⁴⁹ One of many examples would be J. Todd Billings, *Union with Christ: Reframing Theology and Ministry for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), ch. 5.

⁵⁰ Jeff Reed, of Stadia Church Planting, estimated that before March 2020, ten thousand churches in the U.S. in some way recorded their services and offered them on their webpage, but only a few hundred had experimented with things like zoom meetings for small groups.

that he embraced during the restrictions. And visitors to his streamed service, who have little or no history with the church, may now consider just continuing the experience of online church (just with a different preacher, since Ollie will close down his streaming).

Culture is driving us to re-examine what the New Testament teaches about church. We must avoid the assumptions of the past, and present: phrases like “of course church is a physical assembly” on the one side, and “of course we can gather, online” on the other. The old standard ecclesiology textbooks will not suffice: both sides look to their own definitions of things like ἐκκλησία, then look at these textbooks and say, “Yes, that’s me, that’s exactly what we’re doing.”

We can learn much by observing what needs and desires are being met by online ministry. Rarely does something radical happen with digital technology, and then that technology alone drives change, in the sense of both creating a need, and meeting it. Rather some desire for change is already there. As Campbell notes, “the online world is consciously and unconsciously imprinted by its users with the values, structures, and expectations of the offline world.”⁵¹ Perhaps digital ministry does help people, in some contexts, to become more authentic and open. We should both embrace that, and ask questions like, “What in the offline (physical) world drove that?” or, “What are we missing in physical ministry?” Have too many churches rejected Richard Baxter’s idea of getting into people’s homes?⁵² Is church too much a platform presentation⁵³ and not a marriage of preaching (platform, personality) with the actions of the congregation as a whole (people)? As churches move back into physical ministry, they need to ask these questions. They need to be more open to digital ministry as a tool—a tool that is not just for missions and evangelism, but one that could help the church, not hurt it. Old School Ollie should not think of technology only as either (a) a way to put his sermon online, or (b) a way to spread the gospel to closed countries.

New School Ned, on the other hand, should resist the temptation to let the pendulum swing to other extreme. He should ponder why a purely “online church” may not be a church. And that some evangelists of online ministry may be blurring the lines between church and parachurch. And he should give credit to the embodied soul that God created us to be.

Certainly, more research needs to be done. More needs to be done in exegeting the concept of temple and presence, as it relates to online versus physical church. More needs to be done in biblical anthropology, and its implications for evangelism, discipleship, and church planting. And more needs to be done in the comparison of physical versus online learning, and outcomes—not just with Christian ministry, but areas outside of the sacred such as education and health.

6. Conclusion

Online church is not church. This is a contradiction, not an oxymoron. Some of the things a church does can certainly be taken online. Perhaps some parts can be done better online, in certain contexts, than in person. Perhaps others are best done in a hybrid model. The reason that online church is not

⁵¹ Heidi A. Campbell, “Understanding the Relationship Between Religion Online and Offline in a Networked Society,” *JAAR* 80 (2012): 80.

⁵² Baxter, a Puritan pastor in England, spent two days of each week in pastoral visitation, that is, in the homes of his people.

⁵³ Jonathan Leeman makes a good point of this (church is not a performance) in his book, *One Assembly: Rethinking the Multisite and Multiservice Church Models* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 26–27.

church is at least two-fold. First, all the indicators, both historical (the past and future temples), and in imagery (the ramifications of the church as temple now), are that God’s dwelling in the church is in a *place*. And the indicators are that this place is in *one* place, the local church. So yes, this third level of God’s presence could exist in thousands of places at one given time, since there are thousands of (physical) churches that meet in a given time zone on a given Sunday. But the third level of God’s presence does not occur in one “church” that is really 800 physical locations. That is rather the second level of God’s presence, his indwelling of each believer. Similarly, even though the digital world has been redefining terms for decades—such as a digital “presence” or “place”—we can’t just throw a term into a new context and assume that the New Testament allows for that in its theology.

The second reason that online church is not church is that it minimizes biblical anthropology. It is not only assumed, but often stated, that online church can do discipleship, fellowship, the “one another’s,” even the sacraments, just as well as physical church. But the Bible nowhere teaches that we can commune, fully, with God in our “soul” only, without our body. In fact, the Bible teaches the opposite, that physical bodies are an integral part of God’s sanctification and redemption. As Duvall and Hays say in the closing paragraph to their book on God’s presence,

The fall of humanity is best seen as a loss of presence. Presence incarnate in Jesus Christ and made real by the empowering Spirit makes possible the people of God as his new temple. Presence describes the end result of God’s kingdom: eternal communion with the King (“I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom”). Presence supplies the goal of the gospel: salvation for relationship, for fellowship, and for worship. Presence stands as the final chapter of God’s salvation story: a long-anticipated return to the garden. The story moves from walking in the garden to worship in the garden. And the garden is the whole of the new creation, in the shape of the holy of holies, a temple now indwelt by God’s presence. He will wipe away our tears and we will see his face (Rev 21:4; 22:4).⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Duvall and Hays, *God’s Relational Presence*, 335.