The Almost Joys of Online Church

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Imagine the only exposure you have ever had to football (aka soccer) was through playing the foosball (table football) table at your corner shop. When the word 'football' is mentioned, you would only think of all those foosball games played with your teenage friends, crowded around the table, frantically moving those levers and rods with the little plastic red and white men to try and flick the tiny ball into the goal.

But let's say you get invited to a real football match at the local stadium. Here you get to experience the intensity of the actual game on a real field surrounded by passionate, devoted fans. And it is exhilarating. The word 'football' would be redefined for you when you realise that foosball is a poor copy of the real thing.

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This analogy is similar to the way most of us have experienced church. If we had never experienced the joy of real church, we would think online church is the real thing. It is true that meeting online has had an important role to play during these Covid times, but it is a poor substitute for true church. It might have some online worship, online preaching and even some

online fellowship (through social media, of course), but the Biblical concept of church is much, much more than these things.

What is Church?

Our culture sees church as a Sunday event or possibly as a building in which worshippers gather. But the Biblical picture of church is of a people who gather together and who are joined in a supernatural way by a work of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:13). The Greek word for church, ekklesia, was originally a secular word used to describe citizens of a town or city who would assemble to decide on issues regarding law and public policy etc. The New Testament writers then used the word to speak of Christians gathering together also as citizens, but of a heavenly kingdom and even as a new race no longer defined by our culture but by the work of Jesus (Ephesians 2:14-15).

This doesn't mean we don't have real differences between us, but we relate to each other first and foremost as the people of God (see 1 Corinthians 10:32, Galatians 3:27-28). It is in the strength of real relationships, genuine accountability, a sense of family, of trust in Jesus, and a common experience of the Spirit that has made the word 'church' real and meaningful. With regard to our meetings, we don't see our Sunday meetings as the highlight of the week, since meeting in homes is often the highlight, but we also don't disregard Sundays. The early church celebrated meeting on the first day of the week, the day of the resurrection of Jesus. Throughout church history, the people of God have always risked life and limb to meet. Such is the value of being together.

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Reasons Not to Gather

John wasn't able to join other believers when he was exiled and isolated on the island of Patmos. Many Christians have been imprisoned for their faith and we are called to remember those who are in prison (Hebrews 13:3), separated from the church. Illness and sometimes extensive work travel could separate you from God's people for a time. Obviously during this Covid crisis, some have chosen to avoid any Christian gatherings out of genuine concern or fear of being infected or infecting others. This can also be a legitimate reason to not gather.

However, one of the signs you love God is that you long to be part of church life when you miss out.

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Longing to Meet Together

The sweet experience of being with like-minded worshippers is like no other. Like the psalmist, we remember and long for the joyful worship and "glad shouts and songs of praise" (Psalm 42:4). We say along with John, "..I hope to come to you and talk face to face, so that our joy may be complete" (2 John 2:12). We find ourselves wholeheartedly identifying with Paul as he writes to his friends from Thessalonica: "we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face" (1 Thessalonians 2:17) and "we long to see you" (1 Thessalonians 3:6b).

In fact, the apostle John indicates that our attitude towards the people of God is evidence of whether we are saved or not! This is the point of what John is saying in 1 John 3:14 when he writes, "We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers." In other words, if you have no desire to love the church and are not prioritising His people, what assurance do you have of being saved?

Our desires and actions over time do reveal what is precious to us. Our desires are a gauge to reveal our spiritual temperature, and a deep desire to obey God and love His people is a sign of God at work within us. Our hearts will be where our treasure is (Matthew 5:21).

The Beauty and Brokenness of Church

This does not mean that being devoted to the local church is always easy. If you have been involved in serving and loving God's people for any length of time, you'll have experienced both the beauty and brokenness of church. Let me be vulnerable with you. I've had times where I've wanted nothing more than to be at a safe distance from church family. And chances are you've been there too. Irritated by that person who speaks incessantly, overwhelmed by emotionally needy individuals, in disagreement with or offended by the words or actions of a leader.

Even the apostle Paul had times of being exasperated with sinful saints (Galatians 1:6) and the burdens of church life (2 Corinthians 1:8) and co-workers who had abandoned him (2 Timothy 4:10). Jesus and the disciples had times to get away from the incessant demands of ministry (Mark 6:31). So when I'm irritable and it's hard to extend grace, I take a break, get away for a while, but then the desire to be with the church always floods back. God, by His Spirit, replenishes my cracked and dry soul and helps me to love those who are different to me.

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A Visible Church is a Visible Witness

The idea of church, then, is of a people in genuine relationship through Jesus, who learn to love each another along with all their weaknesses. We get strengthened in our faith by the physical presence of each other as we participate in worship, in fellowship, in prayer, in forgiving, and in growing in truth.

The church really is God's way to show the world and the spiritual realm how clever and wise He is (Ephesians 3:10). That He redeems and works through broken people, who learn by the Spirit to extend grace to each other, truly glorifies God. When our cynical neighbours and the unbelieving communities we live in are exposed to this, they will see we are His disciples (John 13:35). We simply cannot do this through an online platform – it's merely foosball compared to the authentic.

Staying Away

For those staying away from the physical presence of believers during this season, may the Lord help you to find ways to keep giving, encouraging and connecting with other believers. Let's make sure that none of us are avoiding the church because of spiritual stagnation or out of shame over some kind of sinful pattern. Our God loves to renew and forgive as we turn to Him.

In closing, some of us might be playing foosball for a season, but once we have tasted the real thing, our renewed souls will only find satisfaction when we get back onto the pitch. In the meanwhile, we know God is shaping His church and it is a glorious privilege to be part of it.