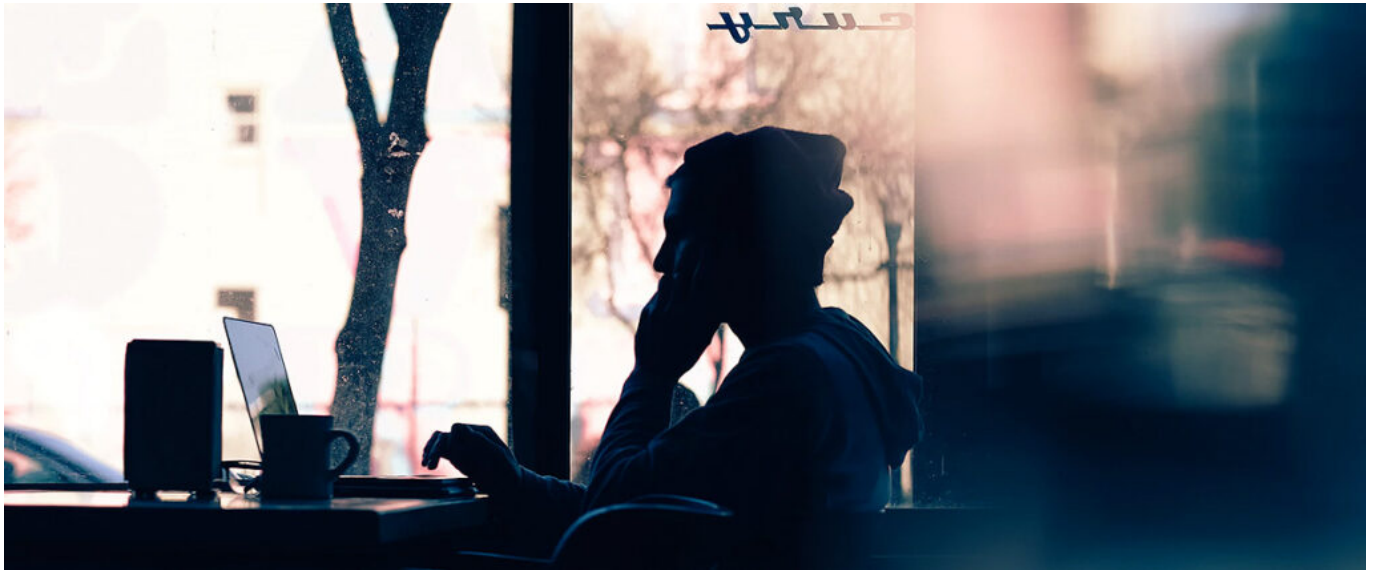


The Non-Existent Online Church

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An oxymoron is a common phrase containing two words that don't actually belong together, because they directly contradict each other. 'Original copy' would be an example. How, exactly, can something be an original and a copy? It can't. Another example of an oxymoron would be 'almost exactly,' or 'extremely average'. Or 'fun run'.

Here's another one: 'Online church'.

The online church doesn't exist. It's a contradiction. The only way around that problem is to change the definition of the word 'church'. You'd have to get rid of its Biblical definition, which points to a group of people living out the commands of Jesus in community, and redefine it as a group gathering in some way whose only connection is that they all claim to be believers and all enjoy listening to the same person speak. You can be strengthened in your faith by listening to someone preach online, or be filled with joy by joining in with worship on YouTube, but you're still not part of a church. You're just someone benefiting from the spiritual gifts of others.

It seems strange to have to even state something so obvious, but if we're going to live according to the Bible, the online church is a literal impossibility. You can't have those two words together and still have it mean the same thing as what's in the Bible. It's possible to be online and it's possible to be part of a church, but it's not possible to be part of an online church.

Online Church Pastors and iChurch Apps

That type of thinking doesn't seem to occur to many people, though. Many churches are holding meetings on a Sunday, streaming them live on platforms like YouTube or through their own websites, and then declaring that those who view their meetings or studio-recorded preaches are part of their online church. Increasingly, church staff members include someone labeled as the 'Online Pastor,' which is a fairly ludicrous concept to wrap your mind around. A person will sit at home, watch footage of a meeting, post a comment with some emojis and legitimately believe themselves to be a part of a church, while a pastor somewhere on the other side of the Internet will claim, in all seriousness, that the login profile and message they pick up on a screen is a person they are shepherding according to the standards of the Bible and of church history. If that sounds

ridiculous, it's because it is.

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And so we've entered the age of living in the punchline – the actual fulfillment of things we used to joke about. Remember when iPhones, iPads and iTunes first arrived and people joked about the next thing being iChurch? No one makes that joke anymore because it actually happened. (Recently, a comedian posted a satirical video about creating your own Virtual Reality church experience. The general response in most of the comments? Give it a year and it'll be real.) For example, an app has been created that is designed to give you the full church experience. You can pray for your fellow congregants by – this isn't a joke – pressing icons as hearts float on a screen. And the app wasn't created by some cynical Silicon Valley entrepreneur; it was pioneered by a famous pastor with an international ministry to millennials.

Church Supplement or 'Home'

The Christian Post, an American website, recently posted an article titled 'Internet Preachers Rise As More Worshipers Migrate Online'. In the article, a person who heads up the online church ministry for a prominent church had this to say: 'We don't expect church online to be the same thing for each person. For some, online ministry is a supplement to help them stay connected to their church when they can't attend in person for various reasons. For others, it's where they find Christ. Some individuals see it as their mission field. For some new believers, it can serve as a front door of sorts which eventually helps them get connected to a local church. And for others, it's a full-fledged church home.'

We'll use the Internet for all its benefits, but we'll remember that it cannot ever substitute what God has called us to.

Full-fledged church home. As in, the Internet can be a full-fledged church home. That last line was spoken by a reasonable, rational person who dresses themselves each day, lives a productive life and has read the New Testament. And yet what they're saying is nothing short of madness. There can be legitimate reasons for people to be unable to physically attend a church gathering, in which case a live-streamed broadcast is a real blessing. There are people like that, as well as people in nations hostile to the gospel and to church meetings. But, let's be honest, the concept of online church is aimed at those who'd rather simply watch on a screen that can be turned on and off and don't have to deal with the complication of interacting with people. They don't even have to leave their homes, for goodness sake. 'Full-fledged church home'? It's just someone's literal home and they're hacking into the system from a distance, and entirely on their own terms.

What Scripture Says

This type of thinking is nowhere in Scripture. Everything – EVERYTHING – in the entire Bible, and especially the New Testament, presupposes that the people of God regularly see each other, touch each other and interact in the same physical space. Think of Jesus: '*Where two or more are gathered, there am I in the midst of them*' (Matthew 18:20). Think of Paul: '*When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus...*' (1 Corinthians 5:4). Think of the anonymous writer to the Hebrews: '*Do not forsake the gathering of the saints...*' (Hebrews 10:25). Think of James:

'Suppose a man comes into your meeting...' (James 2:2). Think of John: *'I hope to see you soon, and we will talk face to face'* (3 John 14).

Think of the various instructions around corporate worship, public tongues, words of encouragement, prophecy, church discipline, breaking bread together, the laying on of hands – things that can only happen when actual people are in the presence of other actual people. The fact that we have to defend this obvious concept shows just how much the world's ways have infiltrated the church. Dialing in remotely just because you can is not conformity to God's way; it's compromise. It's not progressive; it's regressive. The church should never bend itself towards what the world wants, because something significant will always have to be sacrificed. And so for all its self-congratulations for adapting to the desires of the social media generation, the so-called online church fails the most basic of tests: fellowship. If you take away fellowship, you've taken away the church.

Fellowship Is In Our Blood

Fellowship is something that can't be redefined, no matter how creative you get. Probably most of us have heard of the Greek word *koinonia*, which appears 19 times in most editions of the Greek New Testament. It's translated as "fellowship" twelve times, "sharing" three times, and "participation" and "contribution" twice each. But there's a common usage of the word that I really like: It was also used to describe conjoined twins, who had the same blood flowing through both of their bodies, unable to be separated. They were said to have *koinonia* in their blood. And so when Luke described the first church in Acts 2:42, he looked at the group of people living their lives out together physically and decided that was the word he would use. And so what we have is deeper than a loose affiliation or a common cause – it's in our blood.

When the local church has a revelation of fellowship, you can't keep us apart!

To be part of a local church, a local body of Christ, a local fellowship, a local *koinonia*, is to be in each other's lives, in each other's spaces, in each other's affections. When the local church has a revelation of fellowship, you can't keep us apart! We won't be looking for ways to avoid leaving the house – we'll be getting in our cars, on our bikes or on our feet to be together, because it's in our blood. We'll look around us at a world that promises more connection than ever, and we'll realise that the opposite has actually happened, and that the kind of connection we want is face to face, person to person, one life at a time. We'll use the Internet for all its benefits, but we'll remember that it cannot ever substitute what God has called us to.

We Find Ways To Meet

And so we'll meet together on Sundays, but that's just the start. We'll find ways to meet during the week. We'll find ways to see each other before work or during lunch breaks. We'll find ways to gather in each other's homes. We'll find ways to be together, because we've given our hearts to each other.

Paul wrote something to the church in Thessalonica that was profoundly moving, and it gives us a glimpse of how he viewed this group of people. It's found in 1 Thessalonians 2:17-20, and the words almost leap off the page with affection and longing. *'But brothers,'* he wrote, *'when we were torn away from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you. For we wanted to come to you – certainly I, Paul, did, again and again – but*

Satan stopped us. For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ when he comes? Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and our joy.' This! This! This is the revelation God wants for each one of us to have in an increasing way! This is meant to be our testimony, our witness to the world: A group of people so full of love and affection for each other, and so desperate to simply be together, that people can't help but take note that we are disciples of Jesus.

Compromised Imitations

And as we give ourselves to this pattern we'll live in an increasing revelation of the beauty and power of true fellowship. And we'll view worldly innovations, like the so-called online church, for what they are - poor, compromised imitations of the true thing. You can dress it up however you want, but the online church has no place amongst the true church of Christ. It's fake and it cannot produce the fruit Jesus wants. Even the New York Times, which can hardly be considered sympathetic to Bible-based values, wrote an article titled, 'Internet Church Isn't Really Church'. That's how silly the whole idea is - even the most modern, liberal members of society can see right through the façade.

Jesus doesn't want an online church. He wants an in-line church. A church in line with the way He's made us to be.