

Virtual Church — Why God Doesn't Want You Staying At Home

July 25, 2021

How many of you have watched a church service online? How many of you have watched a CrossWinds service online? Don't you think our tech team does a good job putting together a quality online experience? (Applause) We have a lot of people that watch online. This winter, in February during COVID, as many as 300 people watched at least one of our campuses online each weekend. Even now, we have between 100 and 200 people watching at least one of our campuses online each week. That feels like a lot! Those numbers aren't that impressive. Some large churches like Saddleback Church in California have 20,000 people that watch online every weekend.

Most churches did not provide a virtual church experience until COVID. COVID forced the virtual church mainstream in our culture. It didn't happen that way for CrossWinds. We have streamed services for the last 12 years. In the Spirit Lake campus online archive there are more than 1,200 videos.

For us, virtual church --- that is streaming church services --- has been a good thing. It kept people connected during snowstorms in the winter. There are times in February when there are more people online than in the building. It has kept people who are sick connected. It has kept people who are shut-ins connected. I know a number of people who stay connected to their church when they travel. One family began attending CrossWinds last summer during COVID. When they returned to their home state, it was in full lockdown and they couldn't go to church. They decided to keep watching CrossWinds online. The next time

they came back to church was this summer when they returned to CrossWinds after watching online for a year.

In addition, today, most people check out a church and decide if they will even walk in the door of a church after watching services online. The CrossWinds virtual church experience has helped us reach new people in our community.

The virtual church world was not just good for CrossWinds. It was important for the church in America during the COVID pandemic. Some cutting-edge pastors are now claiming that the virtual church experience will soon become the new normal way that people attend church. For example, Andy Stanley shut down his church for a year during the pandemic, putting everybody online. He claimed there was no difference between the people of his church watching online at home and the people of his church gathering in a building. When he was interviewed at Liberty University he said, "I keep hearing people say, 'The Lord commands us to meet. The Lord commands us to meet.' He does not..." Is



Andy Stanley right? Is there no different between watching church in your pajamas at home or is it important to take the time to get dressed and actually go to church and meet people? What do you think?

This morning, we are going to talk about the dark side of virtual church. While virtual church is better than no church at all, only attending church virtually is not God's plan for your life. If you content yourself to stay home and just watch

online out of convenience rather than necessity, you will stifle your growth as a Christian. Over time you will become a self-centered consumer Christian rather than an other-centered mature Christian who is like Jesus.

So while I want to say there are many good things God is doing through the virtual church, and I want to be quick to recognize them, we must not trick ourselves into thinking watching online is God's plan for our lives or an equal substitute for getting together with your church family. This morning, we will see why.

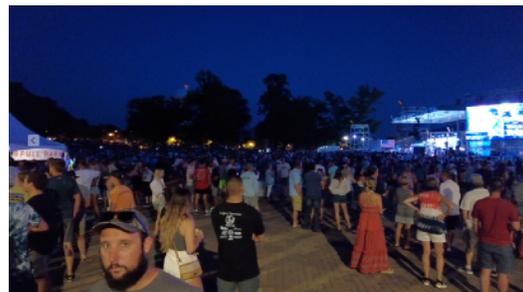
I was a little bummed Jordan and I decided to limit ourselves to one message each on this topic. This is a topic I have thought about for a while so I have a lot to say on the subject. After cutting back my notes, I am down to 14 points. Don't worry. We will move through them quickly. You won't miss a meal. All of these points are important points for us to hear.

Before get into Biblical reasons why the virtual church is not a valid substitute for physically gathering with your church family, let's begin with a practical reason.

1. Digital worship is distracted worship.

It is much harder to stay focused and engaged with something that is happening virtually online than something which is happening physically in front of you.

This July 4, Cindy and I found ourselves without children and



responsibilities. We have heard that the Green Space in Arnolds Park is packed

on July 4, so when we had children in the home, we avoided it. With our new-found freedom as empty nesters, we thought it was time to check out Arnolds Park on the busiest day of the year. It lived up to its reputation. It was wall to wall people, thousands of people. The band was loud. When it was time for the fireworks they were right in front of us on the water. We could feel the thump in our chests as they exploded. It was an engaging experience. It was so engaging that I didn't look at my phone for an hour and a half.

Now imagine if we tried to take in the same experience from home watching a YouTube stream on our cell phones. What is the likelihood we would have stayed engaged for multiple hours without distraction? What is the likelihood that after watching the fireworks on our phone for 20 seconds we would have switched to Facebook, then to Instagram, then to Snapchat? It is very easy to be distracted when watching something on our phones. That is the way phones work. They are built to create short attentions spans and keep us switching between applications every 5 seconds. The digital world is not built for sustained concentration.

We learned that this past year when many students were forced to learn online during COVID. For many students, the online learning experience did not go well. Forty percent of St. Paul, Minnesota, high school students ended failing at least one high school class they took online. Forty percent of students with a failing grade is a lot of students! It gets worse! Forty percent of children in Houston, Texas, schools failed at least two classes while learning online. In Fairfax, Virginia, middle school failing grades increased by 300 percent. It gets

worse. In Baltimore, Maryland, 41 percent of the 20,500 high schoolers had a GPA below 1.0 while engaged in online education. Does anybody think kids were easily distracted while trying to learn online at home? Does anybody think kids found it hard to stay engaged in the online classroom?

We have one person in Spirit Lake that told me how happy he was we returned to in-person worship. Each week, he is in church in the front row. He told me he is one of those people with ADD. It is hard to pay attention. He just couldn't stay engaged watching on his phone at home. When he is in church, in the front row, he can pay attention and learn.

It is not just hard for students to stay engaged with a screen for a length of time. It is hard for all of us to stay engaged. The movie industry knows this. How many of you remember the Marvel movie "Thor"? It is approximately 2 hours in length. To keep you engaged, Marvel Studios spent \$250 million making that movie as engaging as possible. A CrossWinds worship service is 1:15 in length. They don't give me a \$250 million dollar budget a week budget to pull it off. We should expect that digital worship, simply because we are watching something virtually on a screen and not live in-person, will be distracted worship where people have a hard time staying engaged.

Let's move from this practical problem of the virtual church to some theological challenges that come with the virtual church.

2. The church is about gathering as Christ's body, not watching an event.

When you think of the church, what comes to mind? For some people, they consider the church a building. Since they think of the church as a building, they are quick to say that a church building must look like a church. It needs to

have a steeple. It must have pews. It needs to have an organ, because that is what a church building looks like. We hear people talk about going to church. For a previous generation, the church was a building, a place.

A recent trend is not to think of church as a building but to think of church as an event or a program. For these folks, the church service takes on a high production value. Going to church is like going to a movie. It is about an experience. Did I laugh at church? Was I entertained at church? Did the greeters make me feel welcomed at church? Was the coffee hot? Were the donuts fresh? Was I emotionally inspired at church? This is the most common view of church today. Church as a building was the most common view of church in our parents' generation.

The problem is the subtle consequence of thinking of church as a program to be watched, like a movie to be experienced. If church is just an experience to be watched, why limit it to a building? Why not put it online in a virtual church and make the experience available to everyone?

The problem is that while churches meet in buildings, the church is not the building. While worship is part of church, it is not the church. The biblical definition of church is different.

In Greek, the word for church is *ekklesia*. It simply means assembly. The church is the gathering of God's people. You are the church. The building is not the church. The Sunday worship is not the church. The gathering of God's people for the glory of Christ is the church. That means by definition, a virtual church experience where people do not gather but instead watch worship in the isolation

of their own homes cannot be a church. For a church to be a church, people have to assemble and be together. There are aspects of church that cannot happen virtually. They can only happen when we gather physically. Let's look at some of them.

3. The church is to be hearing the Word together and singing to Jesus together.

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. Colossians 3:16 (ESV)

Christians are to have God's Word dwell in them richly and deeply. The way that happens is we are to teach one another the Word of God. Does that happen when we listen to a sermon? Yes. The sermon is one way the Word of God is taught to us. It also happens when we gather in a Life Group. In Life Groups, we open the Bible and study the Word of God together. We also teach one another the Word of God in the halls. After church, when we gather to talk and share with one another, that is an important time. In those times, we share about challenges we have in our lives. The brother or sister in Christ who is listening to us hears our story and is reminded of a verse in Scripture he or she read that week in his or her personal Bible study. He or she shares that verse with us and what happens is we are teaching one another the Word of God. We are encouraging one another with the Word of God.

When people stay home and just watch online, outside of the sermon, how do their brothers and sister in Jesus teach the Word of God to each other? How can they teach the Word of God to others when they are in isolation instead of community?

In addition, it says we are to admonish one another with God's Word. That means to correct one another. When Christians are in church regularly doing life together, they get to see one another and know one another. If there is a behavior patterns in someone's life that is not adding up that a brother or sister in Christ sees, he or she gently sets up a meeting with that person to ask questions and show what the Scripture says on those issues in hopes that their gentle love and concern is met with repentance. That is the way the body of Christ loves and encourages one another on to greater maturity in Jesus. We are all prone to wander. Our church family is there to watch over us and help us so we don't lie to ourselves and drift into sin.

When people are watching anonymously at home, where are the brothers and sisters in Jesus that are a part of their life so they can see their sin and call them to repentance on their sin? If you live in perpetual virtual church isolation, where are your brothers and sisters in Christ to help mature and challenge you?

In addition, Paul said to the Colossians that we are to sing Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs together. The corporate worship of God's people is an important part of the gathering of the people of God. Too often we think worship is what happens on the stage when pastor Andy and others lead us in worship songs. All they are doing is leading us. The real worship happens in the pews when we lift our voices together and sing the truths of God's Word together.

I love when pastor Andy steps back from the microphone and I can hear my brothers and sisters in Christ around me singing, from the bottom of their hearts, worship to Jesus with me. I am also encouraged when pastor Andy steps

into the microphone and sings really loud because that encourages me to sing even more boldly to Jesus with everyone else.

At home, if all you do is watch online as part of a virtual church, how are you at singing with your church family? Most online worshipers simply watch other people worship. They do not join with their brothers and sisters in Christ and sing together in worship. In the virtual church, we end up with a bunch of people watching worship, not people participating in worship. This is why together is better.

4. The church is to gather to encourage one another.

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. Hebrews 10:24–25 (ESV)

I love the writer of Hebrews. He is so practical. He comes right out and says it clear and simple “Don’t stay home.” Don’t think of your Christian faith and your Christian life as merely a personal thing or a private thing. Being a Christian is a corporate thing. We physically gather together because we need one another. Life is hard. We need to encourage each other.

I don’t know about you but being apart from my church family during COVID was hard. I really missed you guys. I missed talking with you. I missed the encouragement you often give. All of us need the encouragement of our church family.

Two weeks ago, I was talking with someone at the church about their mother whose health is failing. I called to encourage him, but as often happens in these phone calls, he ended up encouraging me. He told me about how many

people from the church had called and offered to help. He told me about how people in the church were bringing them meals. This man said he had never experienced anything like the love and encouragement he found in the CrossWinds family.

CrossWinds family, you have no idea how proud I was of our church family in that moment. That is what we are to do. We are to encourage one another, especially in the tough times. This man told me that he had fallen so much in love with the CrossWinds family that this winter, when he and his wife went south for the winter, they didn't plan to be gone as long because they didn't want to be gone from their church family. That shows you the power of love and encouragement in the church family.

Folks, try that online. Online, you have no idea who is watching online with you. You have no sense of community. If you wanted to encourage others in your online church, you wouldn't know how to do it. Life is tough. The church is to be a place where God's people gather together to know one another and to encourage one another as we follow Christ together. This is why together is better.

5. The physical gathering of the church allows us to follow the “one-another” commands of the Bible.

The Bible is filled with one-another commands. These are instructions in the Bible on how Christians are to treat one another and to work with one another. If Christians never assemble as a church, and they all stay home because they watch online, the one-another commands become useless. Let's look at some of these commands.

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Ephesians 4:1–3 (ESV)

Paul instructed the Ephesian church to live in a way worthy of its calling. The Ephesians were to be humble and gentle with one another. If you never meet together as a church, there is no opportunity to be humble and gentle to one another. Paul also told us to be patient with one another. Being patient with one another means there are times when our brothers and sisters in Christ can be a little annoying. They can be frustrating. We need to be patient with them. How much patience do we need to show to our brothers and sisters in Christ if we need to meet with brothers and sisters in Christ?

Paul also told us to bear with one another in love. That means that sometimes people in the church are going to be annoying. People in the church can hurt us by what they say and how they act.

This is where our virtual church friends chime in and agree with what I have to say. That is why they watch from home. They can avoid all the annoying people. They can avoid all the tough-to-love people. This is why they stay home.

I would tell them I feel bad for them. Yes, if you stay home and watch from the comfort of your couch you will have no opportunity to be offended by the sins and shortcomings of others. Do you know why God put people in our church family that we need to be patient with and bear in love? They are there to grow us! They are there to mature us! We do not have the opportunity to grow our patience and mature our character if there are no hard-to-love people in our lives.

Those who watch from home so they can always avoid the hard-to-love people will find themselves stuck in perpetual spiritual immaturity.

Look at more of the one-another commands in the Scriptures.

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. Ephesians 4:32 (ESV)

How are we to be kind to one another if we just watch from home? How can we forgive our fellow Christians if we never get together to be offended by fellow Christians? How can we be kind to our brothers or sister in Christ if we never gather to meet or know our brothers or sisters in Christ? Together is better, even if it is harder.

6. Joyfully participating in the physical gathering of the church is proof we belong to Christ.

If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. 1 John 4:20 (ESV)

This is super important. The Bible tells us that when we become a Christian and trust in Jesus' death and resurrection to pay for our sin, we are made into a new creation and brought into relationship with God. Ephesians 2:1-10 tells us how Jesus restores our relationships with God vertically. Ephesians 2:11-20 tells us that Jesus doesn't just restore our relationships with God vertically, but he restores our relationships with our fellow Christians horizontally. In the church, people who used to be enemies are made into family and friends. In the Bible, we read about Jews and Gentiles being one through Jesus in the church. We miss the significance of that statement. Jews wouldn't even eat with Gentiles. Jews wouldn't even walk through Samaritan territory. When they did, they literally shook the dust of Samaria off their feet when they

left the area because there was such hostility between these groups, yet in the church, Jews and Gentiles are knit together as one family.

One of the proofs of the genuineness of our salvation is we joyfully gather with our church family. Even though others have a different background and different traditions and even though we should be enemies in the world, the Jesus who unites us is greater than any of the differences that divide us. Look how Paul articulated this truth.

For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. Ephesians 2:14–16 (ESV)

Paul's point was, in the church we see people who were formerly enemies united together in Jesus. John went so far as to say, if someone says they love God, but they hate a brother in Christ, they cannot be a Christian. They have fake faith.

If you stay at home and only watch online, you have no brothers and sisters in Christ that are different from you. There is no way to display to the world around you that Jesus has taken people who are different from you, people who would normally be enemies to you, and united you with them around Jesus. When the church physically gathers it displays the unity Jesus has created by making us a new people and a new family where the unity of Jesus is bigger than any of the differences that divide us.

If people refuse to gather as a church because they are more comfortable in isolation at home, where is the proof they belong to Christ? Where is the proof

that Jesus has transformed them into new people and united them into a new family?

Today, we see churches that are divided by race. We have black churches and white churches. We see churches that are divided by age groups. We have young people at the hip church and old people at the dying church. That is not Jesus' vision for the church. Jesus' vision for the church is that no matter what our race, no matter what our age, we are all gathered to worship Jesus. The Jesus that pulls us together is bigger than anything that pulls us apart. That is my vision for CrossWinds. I want us to be a church filled with people of different ages and someday a church filled with people of different races all united together around Jesus. That cannot happen if we just watch from home. Together is better.

7. The physical gathering of God's people is used by God as an evangelistic tool in the world.

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. John 13:34–35 (ESV)

When the church gathers, and there are people of different ages and different races and different economic backgrounds all gathered around Jesus and united by Jesus, that has a powerful evangelistic effect on the world. When people walk in the door of a church and see Democrats and Republicans praying together and people who are rich and people who are poor serving together, they are amazed at what they see because it is the exact opposite of the world we live in, which is filled with division and strife.

When people of the world see the unity and joy of the church that is to be found in Jesus, they will say, “I don’t know what you have but I want a piece of it because it is like a breath of fresh air in our sin-sick world.”

If you stay home and just watch church from the comfort of your couch so you can have pastor with your pancakes and waffles with your worship, how are you contributing to the evangelistic power of the church to show the unity of Jesus to the world? This is why God doesn’t want you staying home. Together is better.

8. The physical gathering of the church is needed for the effective use of our spiritual gifts.

The Bible tells us that when we become Christians, God gives each of us at least one spiritual gift. A spiritual gift is something the Holy Spirit enables us to do to serve others in the church. Spiritual gifts are never given to serve ourselves. They are given to help us serve others. The Bible says that when we use our gifts to serve others in the church we experience effectiveness for Jesus. We will also experience joy.

God gives the people of his church a variety of gifts. Many of them look rather ordinary. Let’s read about a few of them together.

Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness. Romans 12:6–8 (ESV)

So the picture is the local church is Christ’s body on earth. God has assembled the local church and put the people in the local church that he wanted in that church. God gifted the people of the church. He placed people in specific

churches and gave them specific gifts because that is what other people in the church need. When the people of the church use their gifts, the church is built up. Other Christians are built up as we use our gifts to serve one another in the church.

Now look at this from the perspective of the virtual church. If you stay home and watch from the couch, you never have the opportunity to use your gifts in the church and serve others in the body. You deny yourself the opportunity to be effective for Christ. You deny yourself the joy that could be yours that comes from using your gift. Other people in the church who need your gift are not encouraged and built up. The progress of God's kingdom in this world is frustrated when people choose to worship virtually in isolation at home rather than physically with one another where they can find, use, and bless others with their gifts.

9. God dwells more intimately in the physical gathering of the church than in individual Christians.

When it comes to experiencing God and the presence of his Holy Spirit, there is something special that happens when we gather for worship in the church. Think of it this way.

Level 1 - God is everywhere.

**Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence?
Psalm 139:7 (ESV)**

God is everywhere. There is no place we can go to escape God's presence. If we go to the top of a mountain, God is there. If we dive to the bottom of the ocean, God is there. If we travel into a cave deep in the heart of the earth, God is there. In that sense, God is everywhere. Nobody can get away from God.

When you become a Christian, something changes. God dwells more intimately in you than he did before you became a Christian.

Level 2 - God dwells more intimately in us when we become Christians.

...even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.
John 14:17 (ESV)

When you become a Christian, God sends the Spirit of truth inside of you. This is the Holy Spirit. God dwells more intimately in Christians than he does with those who do not know him. This is why when you become a Christian, the Holy Spirit inside of you convicts you of sin you have never seen before. The Holy Spirit leads you to repentance you never desired before. The Holy Spirit gives you a hunger to read the Bible you never had before. While God is technically everywhere, through the Holy Spirit he dwells more intimately in Christians.

Now it gets interesting.

Level 3 - God dwells even more intimately in the gathering of the local church than he does in the life of individual believers.

"For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them."
Matthew 18:20 (ESV)

God's presence dwells more intimately in the gathering of God's people than in the personal Bible study and prayer of God's people.

Do you not know that you (plural) are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you (plural)? 1 Corinthians 3:16 (ESV)

In the Old Testament, if you wanted to be with God, you went to the temple. Even though God is present everywhere, the temple was where God's presence dwelt on earth in the most special and powerful way. Even in the

temple, there were places that were closer to God and places that were farther from God, the closest being God's presence in the Holy of Holies. The problem is the Old Testament temple is gone. Where does God's presence reside most powerfully and intimately than any other place on earth today? It is in the gathered church. The gathering of the church is the temple where God now dwells. The place where you can meet with God most intimately and experience God most powerfully is in the gathering of God's people in the local church.

This has a number of implications. Those who deny themselves the privilege of being part of the gathered worship of the church are denying themselves the privilege of being in the place where God's spirit dwells most fully and richly on earth. You cannot know God as intimately and experience God as closely when you watch online at home as when you physically gather with other believers in the church. God dwelling, that is templing, in the gathering of his people is a consistent theme in the Bible.

For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, "I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people." 2 Corinthians 6:16 (ESV)¹

While I recognize there is a place for virtual church in our lives and our culture, don't be tricked into thinking watching online is the way God wants you to experience him. To know God most intimately, we must regularly be a part of the physical gathering of God's people in the church. This is why together is better.

10. God promises to destroy those who destroy the gathering of the church.

Do you not know that you (*plural*) are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you (*plural*)? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's

¹ See also, "...in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit." Ephesians 2:21-22 (ESV)

temple is holy, and you (plural) are that temple. 1 Corinthians 3:16–17 (ESV, parentheses added)

When the church gathers as a church family, God's spirit dwells among us. Since God dwells among us in a special intimately way when the church gathers, this is why Paul was adamant that anyone who destroys God's temple will be destroyed by God. God's temple, his dwelling place is sacred. Those are very strong words. Originally this referred to anyone who tried to divide the church or caused splits in the church. They would be dealt with severely by God. In our case, it wasn't a person that divided and destroyed the church. It was a pandemic that stopped the meeting of the church.

The point remains. God does not like anyone destroying his temple, that is the gathering of his people. This is why together is better.

11. Digital pastoring is difficult pastoring.

Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. Acts 20:28 (ESV)

Pastors and elders have a God-given responsibility to watch over the flock God has entrusted to their care. This means elders and pastors need to know people. They need to have relationships with people. If someone contents himself to just watching at home online, how do pastors and elders do their jobs of watching over these people? How do they stay connected with these people? How do they care for these people?

Last week I was talking with a couple after church. They had recently returned after COVID. As part of the conversation, the wife shared about how difficult things were at work for her. They just couldn't find enough employees to

cover shifts. As she was sharing with me, I felt prompted to just pray for her. I asked her if I could pray. I put my hand on her shoulder and called out to God for mercy and grace on her behalf. When I finished praying, she looked up and said, “Thank you. I needed that.” How can pastors pray for people in their time of need or help people in their time of need if they just watch from home and we do not know of their needs?

Digital pastoring is difficult pastoring. This is why together is better.

12. Baptism and the Lord’s Supper were not intended to be virtual and individual.

A few years ago, I received a text after the service from someone watching online. Apparently, this person watches online all the time. I am thankful this person is connecting. I am also thankful this person took the time to reach out to me and text me. The text said, “At the beginning of the next communion service could you please let the online watchers know we are taking communion that day. That way we can have juice and crackers prepared.”

That was a strange request, but that viewer was well-intentioned. This person is taking communion seriously and is trying prepared for the Lord’s Supper in a virtual world. I am not throwing this person under the bus in any of these comments.

The problem is when we look at the Lord’s Supper in the Bible, we find the Lord’s Supper is not just intended to point us to Jesus as the one who has restored our relationship with God. During the Lord’s Supper, we are to look across the room and remember that Jesus has restored our relationship with one

another. That is part of the symbolism of the Supper that is lost when it is celebrated online. Look what Paul said.

Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. 1 Corinthians 10:17 (ESV)²

Paul said that Jesus celebrated the Lord's Supper with one loaf that was broken and given to his disciples. That has significance. The one loaf is to remind us that we are now part of the church. We are one body that is symbolized as we take of one loaf together.

At CrossWinds, we do not take the time to divide up one loaf of bread in a service. That is for time and sanitary reasons but at least we are celebrating the Lord's Supper together as one family. That is important. It is a reminder that Jesus did not just restore our relationships to God the Father but with one another. That symbolism of the Lord's Supper is easily lost when people celebrate at home online. I recognize there are times when online communion is the best we can do but it shouldn't become the regular practice that we do. Together is better.

In a similar way, baptism is not to be celebrated as an individual and isolated thing but as a public proclamation to others and your church family of your faith in Christ.

But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Acts 8:12 (ESV)

How do you celebrate baptism in a virtual church? If the only difference between your morning shower and your baptism service is the soap, that is not

² The same is true for the cup. Jesus didn't just celebrate the supper with one loaf but with one cup. "And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, and they all drank of it." Mark 14:23 (ESV)

good. The Bible doesn't want us to practice baptism alone in isolation. This is why together is better.

13. Church discipline is almost impossible virtually.

When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord. 1 Corinthians 5:4–5 (ESV)

In this passage, Paul was talking to the Corinthian church about a man in the church who was involved in sexual sin. It was a man who had his father's wife. It looks like this guy was sexually involved with his stepmother. That is weird. Paul said the church couldn't ignore this. It needed to address it. It needed to call this guy to repentance. Paul said this man needed to be handed over to Satan so his spirit could be saved. This church discipline was designed to wake this guy up to the grim reality of his sin before it was too late for him to repent.

One of the things a church does is call brothers and sister to repentance when we see a pattern of sin in a brother or sister's life. This is not because we don't love people but because we do love people.

How does that work online when nobody knows you? When you have no church body that knows you and cares about you, there is nobody to have those tough conversations with you. This is why together is better, especially when it comes to turning us away from sin.

14. Developing and affirming elders is almost impossible virtually.

The Bible is clear there is to be leadership in the church. There is to be a plurality of elders leading the church.

As soon as we move to the virtual church, it is almost impossible for people to know one another. That means it becomes almost impossible to recognize and affirm elders in the church. If the entire church went completely virtual, there would be no way to find and affirm the next generation of leaders for the church, which would lead to the extinction of the church.

Let me read for you a few of the qualifications for elders. You will notice almost all of them can only be affirmed by a community of people that physically gathers to know one another and watch how people live.

Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive...
1 Timothy 3:2–4 (ESV)

How do you recognize any of those things in people that attend church virtually? This is why together is better.

Conclusion

This morning, I have three takeaways for you.

1. Remember that while the virtual church is a good thing, because it is better than not being part of a church, it can never replace the physical gathering of the local church. Those who tell you the Lord does not want us to meet are dead wrong. The church is not an event to be watched. It is the assembling of God's people together. If you are stuck at home in a winter storm, watch online. If you are in a nursing home, watch online. If you are traveling or have to work on Sunday, watch online. There are many reasons why watching online is a good temporary substitute for church. However, don't think virtual

church can ever replace the physical gathering of the church. God doesn't want you staying at home.

2. Keep this message handy in your Bible. Many pastors are pushing the virtual church and almost nobody is talking about its dangers. You will run across many of your Christian friends that see nothing wrong with staying at home and watching online. My hope and prayer is this sermon and this handout will help you explain what the Bible says about the virtual church to your brothers and sisters in Christ so they don't make a regular practice of staying home
3. Pour yourself into being a part of your CrossWinds church family. Use your gifts and skills to help others. You will have great joy and make an eternal difference by being committed and connected to your local church. That is God's plan for your life.



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