

Journal of Christian Studies

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Journal of Christian Studies

FAITH SEEKING UNDERSTANDING

The *Journal of Christian Studies* is the flagship journal published by the Center for Christian Studies. The journal's purpose is to make quality scholarship accessible to the broader church. It is intended to **benefit all thoughtful Christians and church leaders, scholars and non-specialists.**

The goal is ultimately missional and the scope international.

The *Journal of Christian Studies* is issued **three times a year**, with articles written by scholars who are both experts in their respective fields and active leaders in their churches. Each issue of the journal unpacks a topic or theme that is important to the church's faith and practice in our current culture. Articles address these themes through biblical, theological, historical, and sociological perspectives, communicating rigorous scholarship in an accessible way.



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A New Journal

In 1980, under the leadership of Michael R. Weed, the *Faculty Bulletin* of the Institute for Christian Studies was published with contributions by Allan McNicol, James Thompson, Michael Weed, Paul Watson, Tony Ash, and Don Crittenden. According to Weed, the purpose of the collection of articles was to encourage “reflection on the implications of Christian faith for life.”

Over the following decades, that same noble purpose guided the publications of Weed, McNicol, and other contributors. In 1989, the journal became known as *Christian Studies*, and it continued as such until its final issue in 2019. During the last five years of the journal, I had the honor of serving as editor alongside the managing editor, Todd Hall.

The discontinuation of that publication created a void, and there was a groundswell of support for a new journal that would be a venue for thought-provoking writing that instructs and encourages the church at large. As some readers have described it to me, church leaders and thoughtful Christians need a publication that is more accessible than the purely academic journals but more rigorous than the popular-level magazines.

To help fill the void, we present to readers a new journal. The *Journal of Christian Studies* is the flagship publication of the Center for Christian Studies, a new nonprofit ministry dedicated to making quality biblical and theological resources more accessible to churches and Christian leaders.

In keeping with CCS’s mission, each issue of the journal unpacks a topic or theme that is important to the church’s faith and practice in our current culture. Articles address these themes through biblical, theological, historical, and sociological perspectives, communicating rigorous scholarship in an accessible way.

The journal’s purpose is to make the best of theological scholarship available to the church, with articles that are written by scholars who are both experts in their respective fields and active leaders in their churches. In other words, the editorial team has adopted the goal articulated by Weed: biblical and theological reflection made accessible and even practical. This journal is

intended to benefit all thoughtful Christians and church leaders, scholars and non-specialists alike.

The *Journal of Christian Studies* will be issued three times a year. In order to receive subsequent copies, make sure you have subscribed at the website: www.christian-studies.org/jcs.

A New Challenge

When 2020 rolled around, some ministers and Christian leaders took advantage of the calendar and cast a “20/20 vision” for their churches. We are trained to anticipate better things in a new year, and the beginning of 2020 seemed especially hopeful, or at least no more challenging than recent years. Little did we know that, two years later, congregations would lose 15, 30, even 50 percent or more of church members to a disease—though indirectly so.

The last two years of “pandemic life” have seen unprecedented change in society at large, and churches have been among the institutions most severely affected. Some of the changes affecting churches are perhaps good, but most seem bad. It has been difficult to assess the long-term ramifications in the midst of the storm. Although not yet 20/20, we now have the benefit of some hindsight. What have we learned in general, and what have we learned as a church about the church—about ourselves?

The doctrine of the church and sacraments has habitually been marginalized among evangelicals, a sort of theological afterthought. Arguably, COVID-19 lockdowns of 2020 and their ongoing effects have further revealed the widespread weaknesses in ecclesiology across a spectrum of Christian churches and denominations.

For this inaugural issue of the *Journal of Christian Studies*, I asked contributors to consider topics at the intersection of ecclesiology or Christian ministry and the pandemic. Here are some of the questions I asked them to address: How have the lockdowns negatively affected the church? Are there any positive effects? How have Christians in the past dealt with plague and pandemic? What is missing in self-administered, isolated participation in Eucharist? What are the effects of the “screenification” of the assembly and liturgy? What are the repercussions of the government pronouncing religious assembly to be

illegal and of the church submitting? How has ministry changed, or how should it adapt? What good things have we discovered? How can churches now move forward? How can Christians and churches be better prepared for any future pandemic and lockdowns?

The contributions here interact with these and similar questions theologically and in conversation with biblical, historical, and sociological material. The ministers who answered my interview questions have also thought deeply about these questions as they have worked on the frontlines in churches. The writers and interviewees do not all share exactly the same approaches; there are differing perspectives in the following pages.

It is fitting to begin the *Journal of Christian Studies* in this way—addressing an issue of pressing relevance to the church in a way that is theologically and biblically responsible. Our hope is that these contributions will spark reflection and discussion among readers and that church leaders will be better equipped to shepherd God’s people through future trials and challenges.

A New Community

Finally, we invite readers to interact with the articles and their ideas at the Center for Christian Studies weblog. If you’d like to engage with an article, visit the blog at Christian-Studies.org/blog, find the entry for this issue (JCS I/1), and proceed to question, comment, and interact. Better than a “letter to the editor” feature that must wait for the next published issue, this format provides a more immediate way to connect with the content of the journal within a new community of interested readers. Take up, read, and engage!

Keith Stanglin

Editor

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A Worshipping Community on a Mandated Break

Ed Gallagher

Heritage Christian University

The pandemic has been bad for me: I've enjoyed it too much.

Well, I have not actually enjoyed the pandemic so much as the decree to avoid people, to stay home. As an introvert, a father for a homeschooling family, and a teacher who has for years earned a living from online education, I found myself largely unaffected by government-mandated lockdowns. Actually, such mandates proved to be a period of refreshment and relaxation for my family and me. True, we live in deep-red Alabama, where there is no discernible panic about the pandemic, and an actual lockdown lasted for only a couple of weeks. But to the extent that we could use the pandemic as an excuse to stay home, we were living the high life. Our time had come.

And I suffered—not any sort of emotional distress or other felt pain, but an enhancement of my own negative qualities. My yielding to my own tendencies to avoid people (like the priest and Levite mentioned by Jesus in Luke 10:31–32¹) has led me further from Jesus, further from the one who magnified love of neighbor as one of the twin pillars upholding the entire Law and the Prophets (Matt 22:40), further from the one who expressly commanded his disciples to follow his example of self-effacing service to others (John 13:15), further from the one who pronounced such service a chief criterion of judgment (Matt 25:31–46).

¹ I do not mean that avoiding people was a character trait of priests and Levites, but that in this instance (in the parable) they did so. To avoid unduly negative interpretations of this priest and Levite, see Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (New York: HarperOne, 2014), 90–95.

The pandemic has been bad for me. Whether I like it or not, I need the church.

It is not good that the man should be alone.

—Genesis 2:18

God's plan has always been for people to live in community. As Christian psychologist Mark Yarhouse proposes, "To be human is also to experience a longing for completion."² Or, as C. S. Lewis expresses, "We are born helpless. As soon as we are fully conscious we discover loneliness. We need others physically, emotionally, intellectually; we need them if we are to know anything, even ourselves."³ Lewis was talking about what he called Need-love and later came to call Affection (which he linked to the Greek term *storgē*), the kind of love indicative of parents and children but seen also in other relationships. Marriage or family is one way of satisfying the human need for companionship. According to Jesus, Christian believers form a family, the bonds of which transcend other family ties that are based on blood or legal contract (Mark 3:31–35). Our Lord asserted that there might be times when abandoning traditional family units could accomplish God's will and lead to the establishment of stronger and more numerous family relationships (Mark 10:29–30). He even proclaimed the necessity of "hating" (Luke 14:26)—or, at least, "loving less" (Matt 10:37)—traditional family members on behalf of Jesus. On more than one occasion Paul says that Christians have been adopted by God, so that they can now address God as "Father" (Rom 8:15–17; Gal 4:5–6). The most common label for Christians in the New Testament is, of course, not "Christians" or even "disciples," but "brothers (and sisters)."⁴ If it is not good for the man to be alone, the New Testament encourages us to think that the primary way for God's children to find companionship is not in a traditional family but in God's family.

While the New Testament most often calls individual believers "brothers (and sisters)," it usually refers to the family to which they belong by the label

² Mark A. Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria: Navigating Transgender Issues in a Changing Culture* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2015), 37.

³ C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1960), 10.

⁴ Paul Trebilco, *Self-designations and Group Identity in the New Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 16.

ekklesia (ἐκκλησία). This word appears 114 times in the New Testament and 100 times in the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek translation of the Old Testament (of which 23 occurrences are in the deuterocanonical portions). In the New Testament, Paul uses the term far more than other writers (62 times in the thirteen canonical letters), though it also appears frequently in Acts (23 times) and Revelation (20 times). In the rest of the New Testament, the word is “patchily distributed” (Matthew, thrice; Hebrews, twice; James, once; 3 John, thrice).⁵

How shall we translate *ekklesia*? Traditionally, in English, we use the word “church” in translations of the Bible,⁶ but only in contexts in which the Christian community is in view. There are contexts, even in the New Testament, when the Christian community is not in view (Acts 7:38; 19:32, 39, 40).⁷ Clearly the word “church” is not always appropriate, even in the New Testament. Is it ever appropriate? Though “church” is traditional in the English Bible, the first major English Bible translator to base his work on the Greek and Hebrew texts rejected it. William Tyndale used “congregation” as a translation of *ekklesia*, thinking that “church” carried too much baggage having to do with hierarchy and institutionalism.⁸ The current standard Greek-English lexicon for the New Testament (BDAG) agrees with Tyndale, suggesting the glosses “assembly” or “gathering” or “community” or “congregation,”

⁵ C. K. Barrett, *Church, Ministry, and Sacraments in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 9.

⁶ The English word “church” derives through German (where the word is *Kirche*) ultimately from Greek κυριακόν (“lordly”), an adjective cognate to κύριος (“lord”), a frequent New Testament title for Jesus. The adjective itself appears twice in the New Testament (1 Cor 11:20; Rev 1:10). In the fourth century, κυριακόν could refer to a church building (e.g., Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 9.10.12). When Christians today use the word “church” to refer to the church building, they unwittingly echo the fourth-century usage of this Greek word. But, of course, the word “church” in the English Bible, as a translation of ἐκκλησία, encompasses the people and not the building.

⁷ The KJV uses “church” at Acts 7:38, but more recent translations have “congregation” (ESV, NRSV).

⁸ See David Daniell, *William Tyndale: A Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 122, 148.

reserving the gloss “church” only for those instances that have a worldwide entity in view.⁹

We have noted that *ekklesia* appears one hundred times in the Greek Old Testament (e.g., Deut 31:30), though we never in our English Bibles encounter the word “church” before Matthew. The two main words in Hebrew that denote the congregation of God are *qahal* (123 times) and *ʿedah* (149 times). In the LXX, *qahal* often (73 times) becomes *ekklesia*, but is also often (35 times) rendered as *synagoge* (συναγωγή). *ʿedah* is usually translated *synagoge* (130 times), never *ekklesia*. Thus, at the time of Jesus the Greek Scriptures contained two prominent words for the community of God (*synagoge* and *ekklesia*), both meaning basically the same thing, but *synagoge* had already become associated with Jewish synagogues. This prior adoption of the most prominent term in the LXX (in which *synagoge* appears 221 times) may have contributed to the Christian adoption of the second most prominent term in Scripture for their gatherings.¹⁰

Though *ekklesia* appears mostly in Paul and hardly at all in the Gospels, it does appear on the lips of Jesus in two passages in Matthew. Most famously, Jesus responded to Peter’s confession of faith in his Messiahship by promising to build his *ekklesia*, which would not be defeated by the gates of Hades (Matt 16:18). In the English Bible, this verse is the first occurrence of the word “church,” but in the Greek Bible the word *ekklesia* has already appeared a hundred times (or 77 times, if the deuterocanonicals are excluded). So, we see at least a few significant obstacles that the translation “church” poses for Christian readers: the English word itself, as Tyndale insisted, carries connotations that have little to do with *ekklesia*. Moreover, such a translation obscures the connections between the assemblies of God scattered throughout the Mediterranean world in the first century, and the assembly of God about which these Christians read in their ancient Scriptures. As the previous sentence already indicates, a better translation would be “assembly,” as scholars (noted previously) widely recognize.

But “assembly” itself is not without problems. Does such a term intimate that the group ceases to exist when not assembled? That is indeed the case for

⁹ Frederick William Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 303–4.

¹⁰ For an argument in this regard, see Trebilco, *Self-designations*, 188–90.

an *ekklesia* in fifth-century BC Athens, where the term meant something like “public meeting officially summoned,” as the *Cambridge Greek Lexicon* puts it.¹¹ The *ekklesia* no longer existed once the assembly was dismissed. The same usage is indicative of the LXX for the most part, but some passages such as Deuteronomy 23 (prohibiting certain categories of people from entering the *ekklesia* of the Lord; cf. Neh 13:1) evince a more permanent existence of the *ekklesia*, beyond any actual meeting.¹² The same is true of Philo—and Paul.¹³ As Andrie Du Toit has shown, Paul sometimes uses *ekklesia* for an actual meeting (1 Cor 11:18; 14:19, 28, 34, 35), but more often he uses the word for a group of Christians that regularly meets together (e.g., Rom 16:1). Aside from these two meanings, Du Toit also allows that Paul may sometimes have in view the universal church—that is, a worldwide society that could never actually assemble—a concept more clearly in play in some of the disputed Pauline letters.¹⁴ If “assembly” does not properly capture Du Toit’s second and third definitions, what is the better term? Tyndale chose “congregation,” which perhaps can refer to a group that outlasts its congregating. “Community”—one of the definitions offered by BDAG—might be even better.

¹¹ See the brief entry on *ekklesia* in *The Cambridge Greek Lexicon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 447. The first definition is quoted above, for which the recommended gloss is “assembly”; the second definition offers the glosses “congregation or church.” The *Brill Dictionary of Ancient Greek* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 632, has a longer entry with more detailed references, but the result is essentially the same. The first definition is: “assembly of people called together.” The end of the entry provides a definition for the LXX (“community”) and for the New Testament (“Church, community of the Christians”).

¹² T. Muraoka, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint* (Leuven: Peeters, 2009), 209: (1) “act of congregating”; (2) “large group of gathered people”; (3) “a social organisation and body.”

¹³ For references to Philo, see Trebilco, *Self-designations*, 165–69.

¹⁴ Andrie Du Toit, “Paulus Oecumenicus: Interculturality in the Shaping of Paul’s Theology,” *New Testament Studies* 55 (2009): 121–43, at 133–34. For discussion, see also Trebilco, *Self-designations*, 169–80. For example, Colossians uses *ekklesia* for a local group (Col 4:15, 16) but also for “the universal church” (Col 1:18, 24). In Ephesians, all nine appearances of *ekklesia* (1:22; 3:10, 21; 5:23–32) refer to the universal church (Trebilco, 198–99). This usage of *ekklesia* for a non-local entity is the one situation in which BDAG suggests translating “church” (definition 3c); also Trebilco (165 n. 6), who explains that “assembly” cannot accommodate a “universal” meaning in English. In such cases, Tyndale still used “congregation.”

One thing *ekklesia* does not mean is “called out,” at least, not in the sense proposed by a popular explanation of the word. To be sure, the etymology of the word does imply this meaning (*ek*, “out”; *klesia*, “called”), and one can imagine the citizens of Athens being “called out” of their various locations so that they might assemble. But etymology is not related directly or intuitively to the meaning of a word. (Think: driveway and parkway, or manufacture.) Usually, when people link *ekklesia* to the meaning “called out,” they intend to urge Christians to be separated from the dominant thought processes of the world. It is true that in some important ways Christians should be separate from the world; however we do not derive this idea from the etymology of *ekklesia* but rather from explicit New Testament teaching: “They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world” (John 17:16); “be not conformed to this world” (Rom 12:2).¹⁵ The earliest Greek-speaking Christians used the word *ekklesia* for their gatherings and communities not because of its etymology but because it means “community” and especially because they found the word in their Scriptures in reference to the people of God.

The importance of the *ekklesia* as “community” can be seen throughout the New Testament, in the metaphors for God’s people (e.g., body of Christ; temple of God), in the ecclesiocentric Scriptural interpretation of Paul and other New Testament writers,¹⁶ and in the second (and final) passage in the New Testament in which the word *ekklesia* appears in the mouth of Jesus.

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the *ekklesia*. And if he refuses to listen even to the *ekklesia*, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector (Matt 18:15–17).¹⁷

The members of the *ekklesia* of Christ have a responsibility to one another. They get involved in each other’s business. Several years ago, I attended a

¹⁵ On some of the difficulties of Christian disentanglement from the world, see James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 176–93.

¹⁶ On Paul’s ecclesiocentric interpretation, see especially Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

¹⁷ ESV, altered by replacing “church” with *ekklesia*.

wedding in which the preacher challenged the wedding guests: “We are all witnesses to the vows that this couple has taken; therefore the responsibility falls on each one of us to help them keep these vows.” We are all implicated. It reminds me of the teaching on baptism in the early Christian (late-first or early-second century) document called the *Didache*. According to the *Didache* 7.3, baptism was such a momentous event that the person getting baptized should fast for a few days beforehand—but not just the baptizand, but also the baptizer and other willing members of the congregation. The baptism of a new member of the community was an important event for the community, in part because of the responsibility such an additional member placed on the group, responsibility for care and discipline. Dietrich Bonhoeffer could even say: “Christians must bear the burden of one another. They must suffer and endure one another. Only as a burden is the other really a brother or sister and not just an object to be controlled.”¹⁸

The importance of community is perhaps more apparent than ever in our fractured age. For example, some people long for association through living in shared spaces. The website for The Cohousing Association of the United States (cohousing.org) provides this definition: “Cohousing is community designed to foster connection. Physical spaces allow neighbors to easily interact with others just outside private homes. Common areas including kitchen, dining space and gardens bring people together. Collaborative decision-making builds relationships.”¹⁹ Another example: a few years ago in his *New York Times* column, David Brooks quoted the long-time youth activist Bill Milliken as saying, “I still haven’t seen one program change one kid’s life. What changes people is relationships. Somebody willing to walk through the shadow of the valley of adolescence with them.” Brooks added this comment on problems he sees in America: “It’s a crisis of solidarity, a crisis of segmentation, spiritual degradation and intimacy.”²⁰ What Milliken and Brooks are advocating is a version of

¹⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (1940), trans. Geoffrey B. Kelly, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 5 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 100. Here Bonhoeffer is reflecting on Galatians 6:2.

¹⁹ See Luan Huska, “Cohousing: The New American Family,” *Christianity Today* (Nov. 28, 2016), <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2016/november-web-only/cohousing-new-american-family.html>.

²⁰ David Brooks, “The Power of a Dinner Table,” *The New York Times* (Oct. 18, 2016). On Bill Milliken, see <https://www.communitiesinschools.org/about-us/our-leadership/profile/william-milliken>.

what James Davison Hunter has called “faithful presence,” which involves being “fully present” toward God and imitating God by being fully present toward each other in terms of seeking the good of others through sacrificial love.²¹

Being fully present requires full, physical presence, a fact that reminds us of the “assembly” definition of *ekklesia*. Milliken’s comments also call to mind the observer effect, the influence on phenomena caused by the mere presence of the observer, as when one measures a tire’s pressure by releasing some of that pressure. The presence of people—whether in “the shadow of the valley of adolescence” or otherwise—necessarily has an effect on those around them. When I weigh the pros and cons of teaching Filipino students via Zoom versus getting on a plane and spending two weeks in country to teach them in person, I cannot properly make that evaluation without rereading a letter written to me a few years ago by a couple of those Filipinos: “Seeing you keep on coming back here just sends a great joy in our hearts.” Wholly apart from the content transmitted through teaching, the teacher’s physical presence has an immeasurable (literally) impact on his or her students. Three quarters of a century earlier, Bonhoeffer had exclaimed: “The physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer.”²² And forty years after Bonhoeffer, Woody Allen observed that “showing up is eighty percent of success.”²³ Faithful presence, showing up, walking with others—while I refrain from citing a percentage—is a great deal of what life (and certainly Christianity) is about. Even Job’s friends knew that much.

Community can also be fragile and should not be taken for granted. In the book written as a reflection on his experience running a small seminary for a couple of years, Bonhoeffer had much to say on Christian community.²⁴ He called his book *Life Together* (*Gemeinsames Leben*). His seminary at Finkenwalde gave him the chance to work out ideas already expressed in his doctoral dissertation (written at age 21), in which he asserted, “Christ ... is present only in the church [*Kirche*], that is, where the Christian church-community [*Gemeinde*]

²¹ Hunter, *To Change the World*, 238–86. See the succinct discussion on pp. 243–48.

²² Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 29.

²³ On the sources of this quotation and its variant with “life” instead of “success,” see <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2013/06/10/showing-up/>.

²⁴ For a recent treatment of the Finkenwalde seminary, see Charles Marsh, *Strange Glory: A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York: Knopf, 2014), 231–32.

is united by preaching and the Lord's Supper in mutual Christian love."²⁵ In *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer recognized that the gift of community could be taken away at any moment,²⁶ as it was for him when the government closed his seminary. At all times there are some Christians separated from the community by sickness, or prison, or missionary work. For Christians thus isolated, a visit is a special grace: "The prisoner, the sick person, the Christian living in the diaspora recognizes in the nearness of a fellow Christian a physical sign of the gracious presence of the triune God" (29). Would Bonhoeffer have said that the same effect could be achieved via Zoom? I think he would have recognized, as most of us do, that such technological substitutes for presence are good but not great. He knew that Christians in faraway places "are strengthened by letters written by the hands of other Christians. Paul's greetings in his letters written in his own hand were no doubt tokens of such community" (30). A few years later, Bonhoeffer himself, then in Tegel prison, would receive a letter from Eberhard Bethge, in which he would read the words, "your letters, and the visit, were something of a liberation for me."²⁷

Zoom is not nothing; nor is it all that God wants for us. God wants—and humans need—community. That is the meaning of the term *ekklesia*, about which we should perhaps draw one further point. Earlier we saw that "assembly" might not work as a translation for every appearance of *ekklesia* in the New Testament because, according to the Pauline letters, the word *ekklesia* can encompass the worldwide body of Christ, and the local *ekklesia* continues to exist after the assembly is concluded. But does the local *ekklesia* exist if it does not assemble at all? Scholars have pointed out an easily missed feature of Paul's language in his two longest letters. The Christians in both Rome and Corinth typically gathered in several house churches (cf. Rom 16:5) rather than in large

²⁵ This is part of the dissertation (completed in 1927) that was omitted from the form originally published in 1930, but it is included in the notes of the now-standard English edition: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, trans. Reinhard Krauss and Nancy Lukens, ed. Clifford J. Green, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 1 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 138. See also Green's discussion of this passage at pp. 15–16.

²⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 30. Parenthetical references in this paragraph refer to this work.

²⁷ Letter from Eberhard Bethge to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Jan. 2, 1944, in *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. John W. De Gruchy, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 8 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 248 (document #94).

city-wide assemblies. But Paul makes a distinction in how he addresses the Christians of each city: he greets the “*ekklesia* of God that is in Corinth” (1 Cor 1:2), whereas Romans begins with no greeting to the “*ekklesia* in Rome.” It is probable that in Paul’s day the Christians in Rome never had occasion to assemble all together, whereas such an assembly did take place occasionally in Corinth. The intermittent gatherings of all the Christians in Corinth meant that Paul could address the single *ekklesia* in the city, whereas in Rome, there was no single *ekklesia* but a variety of them.²⁸ The *ekklesia* continues to exist after the assembly is dismissed, but if the assembly never assembles, there is no *ekklesia*, except in the broadest (worldwide) sense. The community must commune. The congregation must congregate. The church must assemble.

Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.

—Westminster Shorter Catechism (1647)

The church fails. It is probably a safe guess that the church has fallen short of its principles more than any other institution in human history. When the task is to grow into the likeness of Jesus (Eph 4:12–16), people are going to fall short of that goal, and followers of Christ have often not even made the attempt to follow Christ. The gate is narrow and the way is strait. Certainly, Bonhoeffer had his own disappointments with the church, with people around him not following the path of *Discipleship*, with those who called themselves the Confessing Church not living up to their confession.²⁹ Maybe that is part of the reason that Bonhoeffer, who praised Christian community as a manifestation of Christ in the world, wrote to Bethge from prison: “By the way, I miss worship so remarkably little. What is the reason for this?”³⁰

In the Bible, God uses various catastrophes to communicate with people—sometimes even sending plagues in order to bring about repentance (Amos 4:10). It would be irresponsible to claim that God sent any particular pandemic on a people for punishment or to compel repentance. It would be unbiblical

²⁸ See Trebilco, *Self-designations*, 171.

²⁹ See Victoria Barnett, *For the Soul of My People: Protestant Protest against Hitler* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

³⁰ Letter from Dietrich Bonhoeffer to Eberhard Bethge, Dec. 15, 1943, in *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 223 (document #86).

to say that God does not do that sort of thing. It would be arrogant to say that God has no reason to do such a thing to us.

We have lived through a time in which the church in many countries, including the United States (where I live), was forbidden for a time from meeting together in large groups for worship. We might consider whether God had a hand in bringing about this result. Often, we look at such things along the lines of the prayer Homer Simpson once offered in response to a flood in Springfield: “Surely this has proven whatever point you had.”³¹ We cry out to God asking for the strangeness to end, assuring him that he has proven whatever point he had, and asking him to restore normalcy. Perhaps “back to normal” is not high on God’s list of priorities. When Martin Luther King Jr. gave his speech on August 28, 1963, from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, it became known as the “I Have a Dream” speech, but one of the original titles in draft form was “Normalcy Never Again.” King was not interested in getting back to normal. Perhaps God is not either.

In Jeremiah 7, the people of Judah insisted to the prophet that normal life would continue, that God loved the status quo, that the temple in Jerusalem assured them of divine favor. Their slogan, as quoted by the prophet, was “This is the temple of YHWH, the temple of YHWH, the temple of YHWH” (Jer 7:4). Jeremiah declared that God had no love for the building that Judah had turned into “a den of robbers” (7:11), that God, in fact, planned on knocking the building down (which he would accomplish through Nebuchadnezzar’s Babylon; Jer 25:9). He cited the example of the previous Israelite shrine at Shiloh, now defunct. According to Jeremiah, it was Israel’s God who caused the desolation of that shrine (7:12–15). God was interested in worship only from people dedicated to God’s ways.

For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever. . . . Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this

³¹ The prayer comes near the end of the episode “Pray Anything,” season 14, episode 10, of *The Simpsons* (original air date: Feb. 9, 2003).

house, which is called by my name, and say, “We are safe!”—only to go on doing all these abominations? (Jer 7:5–10)

Such a declaration should cause us little surprise. It is not the only time in Israel’s Scriptures in which God specifies some prerequisites to worship, without which worship itself is distasteful to God, or worse. Perhaps most famous is Amos.

I hate, I despise your festivals,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
Even though you offer me your burnt offerings,
I will not accept them;
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals
I will not look upon.
Take away from me the noise of your songs;
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.
But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.
(Amos 5:21–24; cf. Isa 1:10–15; Psa 40:6; 50:7–15; 51:16–17)

Jesus finds occasion to quote twice (Matt 9:13; 12:7) the words of Hosea 6:6: “I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice.” God is the one who commanded these acts of worship, these sacrifices and such. And he enjoys them; they provide a sweet savor (Lev 1:9; etc.)—when they are performed by loving hearts attuned to God’s will, attentive to his Torah. Otherwise ... “I hate, I despise your festivals.”

There is a perpetual temptation for people to magnify the importance to God of their own worship, to assume that as long as we get worship done correctly, everything else can take a backseat. The prophets addressed this temptation in the passages quoted earlier. Hosea provides a striking example. The first five chapters of the book of Hosea contain a near constant barrage of criticism of the worship and behavior of Israel. Then the Israelites suddenly turn toward God.

Come, let us return to YHWH;
for it is he who has torn, and he will heal us;
he has struck down, and he will bind us up.
After two days he will revive us;
on the third day he will raise us up,

that we may live before him.

Let us know, let us press on to know YHWH;

his appearing is as sure as the dawn;

he will come to us like the showers,

like the spring rains that water the earth.

(Hosea 6:1–3)

These are the right words, expressing exactly what the Israelites ought to do.

They assumed, and we assume, that God will be pleased. His response:

What shall I do with you, O Ephraim?

What shall I do with you, O Judah?

Your love is like a morning cloud,

like the dew that goes away early.

Therefore I have hewn them by the prophets,

I have killed them by the words of my mouth,

and my judgment goes forth as the light.

For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice,

the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.

(Hosea 6:4–6)

God does not trust these penitents. He has seen this movie before. He knows that their love is like a morning cloud. They still have not figured out that God desires steadfast love and not sacrifice. I presume that what God means is that the Israelites are feigning repentance, though perhaps they have tricked themselves into believing that they are sincere. They believe that to get God back on their side they need to light a cow on fire, make a sacrifice, say a few words, and the relationship will be restored. If they can just do worship the way God likes it, they will be able to show that God has by now proven whatever point he had. But God repeats that they can show such a thing only if they will concentrate less on worship and more on steadfast love, less on burnt offerings and more on the knowledge of God.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30–35) reflects, in part, similar concerns. After all, Jesus chose as his examples of wrong behavior two professional worship leaders, a priest and a Levite. As they passed by the dying man on the roadside, they may have been on their way to the temple, as many readers have guessed. No matter how precise or flamboyant was the worship

that they then performed, they could not be the heroes of this story, a story that illustrates once again the truth of Hosea 6:6.

Why is this a hard lesson for people to learn? Probably because worship is easy—or, at least, worship is easy when the intention behind the worship is to perform the right actions, rather than, say, to encounter God and experience transformation. It is hard to dissent from Hunter’s description of the Christian task: “Only by being fully present to God as a worshipping community and as adoring followers can we be faithfully present in the world.”³² Worship may be the beginning (formation) and end (enjoyment) of the Christian life, and “man’s chief end,” but corporate worship is not the whole of the Christian life. In fact, worship is valuable and pleasing to God only when it serves as spiritual formation—molding worshippers into the image of Christ to then represent God in the world³³—or as a longed-for encounter with God. All too often, worship is neither, but instead “attending worship” is the easiest way of telling others (including pollsters) and oneself that one is a Christian. For some first-century Jews, tithing may have functioned similarly. In Matthew 23:23, Jesus criticizes people who tithe garden spices to the neglect of the weightier matters of Torah. We understand the temptation: tithing spices is a lot easier than living according to justice, mercy, and faithfulness. But the Bible assures us that there are things God considers more fundamental than our worship, that he sometimes puts a stop to his people’s worship when he determines that they desire a normal life rather than a faithful life. In the New Testament, Jesus instructed his disciples that there were reasons why someone might need to stop worshipping in order to take care of another priority (Matt 5:23–24). What were those reasons? Reconciliation with a brother.

If we are trying to understand how God was involved in the pandemic, why the church would face government pressure to stop worshipping corporately for a time, the Bible suggests to us that it might be time for God’s people to examine whether God considers their worship a pleasing aroma. The summer of 2020—when the pandemic was still fresh and government-imposed lockdowns were still common in America, and people marched in the street

³² Hunter, *To Change the World*, 244.

³³ On such a view of worship, see, e.g., James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009).

demanding justice—demonstrates the continuing urgency of Jesus’ advice in Matthew 5: reconciliation with one’s brother should precede worship.

I am reminded of the Appendix to the first autobiography written by Frederick Douglass. In the course of the narrative of his life, Douglass had many times criticized the religion practiced by the slave holding class of the American South, a religion called Christianity. In one section, Douglass’ owner “experienced religion,” and thereby became even more vicious than formerly, for “after his conversion, he found religious sanction and support for his slaveholding cruelty.”³⁴ Such passages in his narrative gave Douglass pause upon a subsequent reading, inspiring him to clarify his religious views in an appendix.

What I have said respecting and against religion, I mean strictly to apply to the *slaveholding religion* of this land, and with no possible reference to Christianity proper; for, between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference—so wide, that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy, is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked.³⁵

This passage, which will provoke only sympathy in a twenty-first-century American audience, should also remind us of the delusion that self-professing Christians can experience in mistaking God’s priorities, in valuing sacrifice and burnt offerings over steadfast love and the knowledge of God.

The recent cultural passion for reconciliation and relationships in some ways coheres with essential ideals of the church. The apostle Paul often dealt with tense situations in the communities he formed or was counseling, and he constantly advised his readers to “regard others as better than yourselves” (Phil 2:3), to “bear one another’s burdens” (Gal 6:2), to consider themselves parts of the same body (1 Corinthians 12). This advice applied not only to people of different socio-economic backgrounds (e.g., see the comments on the Lord’s Supper in 1 Corinthians 11) but also to people of different ethnicities (Ephesians 2). We find a model for such reconciliation among the original disciples of Christ, chosen by Jesus himself, a group that included both Simon the Zealot (Luke 6:15) and Matthew/Levi the tax collector (Luke 6:15; cf. 5:27)—the one

³⁴ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845), ch. 10. I have used the edition in *The Portable Frederick Douglass*, ed. John Stauffer and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Penguin, 2016), 51.

³⁵ Douglass, *Narrative*, 94.

an avowed enemy of Rome, the other Rome's employee.³⁶ (It would be nice to know how Jesus introduced them to each other and what their reaction was.) James K. A. Smith admits that "I often tell my children that one of the reasons we go to church is to learn to love people we don't really like that much."³⁷ Reflecting such ideals, Hunter describes the church as community: "It is here where we learn forgiveness and humility, practice kindness, hospitality, and charity, grow in patience and wisdom, and become clothed in compassion, gentleness, and joy. This is the crucible within which Christian holiness is forged. This is the context within which shalom is enacted."³⁸

In times such as these (that is, at all times), we need to be reminded of first principles. In two passages of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus presented pictures of judgment in which people were surprised at their fate. In Matthew 7:21–23, people who had performed quite amazing works in the name of Jesus were rejected by him because they failed to do the will of the heavenly Father, that is, all the things Jesus had talked about in the previous three chapters, including the crucial summary statement for the entire Law and Prophets: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" (7:12). In Matthew 25:31–46, when people were separated as sheep and goats are separated by a shepherd, they were again surprised to hear their judgment, and again the criterion for judgment revolved around treatment of others. In fact, the goats here were not accused of being unusually bad: they did not steal food from the hungry, they simply did not supply the hungry with food. The goats were normal people, and they were rejected. The scene is reminiscent of Matthew 22:34–40, where we learn that Jesus' nominations for the two most important commandments are love of God and love of neighbor. I do wish we had a longer list from Jesus; I would love to know what he considered the third greatest commandment, and the fourth, and so on. But I will admit that these top two are so difficult to accomplish, and so rarely attempted, that we would do well not to allow ourselves such distractions.

³⁶ I am assuming the traditional interpretation identifying Matthew with Levi, in accordance with the Gospel of Matthew, which tells the story of Levi the tax collector (Mark 2:13–17; Luke 5:27–32) under the name of Matthew (Matt 9:9–13).

³⁷ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 202.

³⁸ Hunter, *To Change the World*, 253.

Is it possible that the pandemic could be good for the church? Not if we insist on a return to normalcy, assuring God that he has proven whatever point he had. God may want to shout at us, “Normalcy never again!” But if we use this season as an opportunity to reflect on the extent to which our priorities align with those of the God whom we worship, to remember that corporate worship is important to God and to us, and that certain behaviors and attitudes serve as essential prerequisites to worship, we might find that God can use this pandemic to bring us closer to him.

The church is, first and foremost, a worshipping community whose life centers on the word of God.

—James Davison Hunter³⁹

A worshipping community. I think most Christians I know would readily identify worship as something essential to the church. A community? I’m not so sure, even though that’s what the very term *ekklesia* means. More—a community of people with responsibilities to one another, who must become burdens to each other, who must be fully present to one another in order to be fully present to God (and vice versa), who must model among themselves the reconciliation and relationships to which God calls all people. One of the lessons the pandemic ought to teach the church is that God’s *ekklesia* should endeavor more intentionally to be the community imagined by Jesus so that this community can worship God in a way he finds more pleasing.

³⁹ Hunter, *To Change the World*, 184.

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“Upon this Rock I Will Build My Livestream”: Reflections on Ecclesiological Emergencies

Keith D. Stanglin

Center for Christian Studies

With the arrival of COVID-19, governments and businesses went on lockdown in mid-March of 2020. In the U.S., it was to be for two weeks, to “flatten the curve” and allow the infection to spread through the population more gradually. It was unprecedented, but most churches agreed and locked their doors. For the first time in their lifetimes, healthy believers were barred from assembling for worship. But the weeks turned into months. In most places, worship assemblies came to be prohibited by local governments, and the vast majority of churches complied.

Churches at large faced a new crisis, and the crisis seemed particularly acute in Churches of Christ. As John Mark Hicks observes, “It has been said that Churches of Christ have three ‘sacraments:’ Baptism, the Lord’s Supper and the Lord’s Day or assembly.”¹ During COVID, weekly Eucharist, or Lord’s Supper, and the Lord’s Day assembly, crucial to the traditional identity of Churches of Christ and so many other fellowships, were severely threatened. The new situation called for a new set of emergency procedures in the face of lockdowns. Christians tuned in to watch livestream videos of worship activities and participate as they were able from home. Believers partook of their own bread and cup, physically administered to oneself or by another presider within

¹ John Mark Hicks, Johnny Melton, and Bobby Valentine, *A Gathered People: Revisioning the Assembly as Transforming Encounter* (Abilene: Leafwood, 2007), 10, also citing Thomas Campbell to similar effect, sans “sacramental” language.

the household. The very fact that adaptive measures were taken testifies to the importance of observing the Lord's Day assembly and Lord's Supper.

Inasmuch as the body of Christ is flesh and in the world, it is subject to the contingencies and changes of time, place, and culture. God's people must therefore adapt creatively and faithfully to the circumstances, especially if there is not a clear word from the Lord. Such adaptations are hinted at in the New Testament itself. For example, Paul's church plant in Corinth encountered a circumstance not addressed in Jesus' recorded teachings: a new believer who is in a marriage to an unbeliever. In this instance, Paul, not the Lord, speaks (1 Cor 7:12). Further, Paul "thinks" a certain course of action "to be good because of the present necessity" (1 Cor 7:26). As the gospel spreads and endures, new situations arise. Paul is not changing the gospel, but he is applying it in new situations—in these cases, perhaps less than ideal situations.

How have the three so-called "sacraments" fared in the face of less than ideal circumstances?

Baptism

Presumably not very long after Jesus commissioned his disciples to go forth in order to make new disciples and to baptize (Matt 28:19), some eager evangelist had a hard time practicing the last command. It is not that he was defiant or flippant about Jesus' instructions. Rather, he was evangelizing in a dry region of the Middle East, and there simply was not enough water for immersion—the meaning of *baptisma*.² What would he do? Would he leave the new convert high and dry?

Before we pass judgment too quickly and think that, if it were important enough, this evangelist would find a way, it may be that modern convenience has compromised our sympathy with his plight. I do not work in a desert, but as I now sit and write during a typically dry summer, I am nearly ten miles away from a reliable body of water that is not man-made. Those ten miles as the crow flies are over twelve by road. In a time when nearly everyone had to

² That early Christian baptism was practiced as immersion is uncontroversial among historians. In his description of baptism in the early church, for example, Robert Louis Wilken writes, "As for method, baptism was always by full immersion in water, not sprinkling or pouring." *The First Thousand Years: A Global History of Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 33.

walk to their destination, a 25-mile round trip for a baptism was a near impossibility. In any given place in the ancient Near Eastern desert, what might the distance to sufficient water be?³

In the canonical Gospels, Jesus said to baptize, but he did not specify in what kind of water, nor did he indicate what to do when there is not enough water, an actual situation that required a practical solution. These questions are addressed, however, in the *Didache* [*Teaching*], whose content if not composition goes back to the first century, making it the oldest Christian document outside the New Testament. The *Didache* was “written in a time of transition and its author is clearly making an effort to harmonize ancient and revered traditions of the church with new ecclesial necessities.”⁴ In this specific case, if there is not ample water for an immersion, the author writes, then “pour out water on the head three times in the name of the Father and Son and Holy Spirit.”⁵ This permission to pour water is the earliest recorded exception to immersion. In the context of the *Didache*, the exemption seems to be as much description as prescription.

In Scripture, there is precedent for finding alternatives when material necessity makes obedience to a liturgical command impossible or extremely difficult. For instance, although the Lord commands an altar of earth to be used for sacrifice, he immediately adds that it can also be an altar of stone (Exod 20:24–25). As for the sin offering, a sheep or a goat is to be sacrificed. But if the worshiper cannot afford one, then two birds may be offered. And if two birds are not affordable, then an offering of flour is acceptable (Lev 5:6–7, 11). Exceptions are possible for those who need them; a rich man should not be offering flour. That liturgical or ritual exceptions may be made in extreme circumstances seems clear, so it should not be too surprising that, in the early church, an alternative to immersion was suggested when immersion was in fact impossible.

³ This scarcity perhaps explains in part the excitement of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, and the immediacy of the baptism, upon finding sufficient water alongside the road (Acts 8:36–38).

⁴ Kurt Niederwimmer, *The Didache*, trans. Linda M. Maloney, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 3.

⁵ *Didache* 7:3, in Michael W. Holmes, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007). The translation is my own.

In the intervening centuries, affusion (pouring) became such a well-known alternative to immersion that it may not occur to ask: why this solution? When faced with the predicament of insufficient water, why did the early church substitute this practice and not something else? Or why substitute at all—why not let the form of words suffice? First, it is important to know that early Christians—at least those living in Syria or Palestine whose practice is reflected in the *Didache*—believed these instructions to be from Jesus Christ and mediated through the apostles. The longer title of the document is *The Teaching [Didache] of the Lord through the Twelve Apostles to the Nations*. These hitherto exclusively oral teachings (later written down) were understood to be apostolic tradition, ultimately derived from Jesus himself, and therefore authoritative. Their putative dominical origin was reason enough for these instructions to get a hearing.⁶

In addition, other considerations probably contributed to the early church's choice of affusion. Since the very word *baptism* means immersion, if a tangible substance were to remain essential to the rite, then it is sensible that water would be used, and as much as possible. In a region deprived of many natural pools or deep rivers, well water would have been more available and dependable year round. Thus it is not one droplet that is called for. In other words, if one cannot be immersed in a bath of running water, then a shower is a reasonable alternative.

Finally, the “pouring out” of water alludes—intentionally or unintentionally—to some passages in Scripture that connect the gift of the Holy Spirit to a liquid poured out. Three times in Acts 2, the Spirit is said to have been “poured out” (*ekcheo*) on the believers (Acts 2:17-18, 33), a gift that is open to all through repentance and baptism (Acts 2:38). It is the same word (*ekcheo*) used in *Didache*. The liquid metaphor or symbolism is consistent with the precedent in the Old Testament prophets, which connects the pouring of water with the Holy Spirit (for example, Isa 44:3-5).

In the early church, the permission to pour water in the extreme case of a water shortage was expanded in the third century to cases of “clinical”

⁶ Pace Niederwimmer, *Didache*, 56-57, who argues that the text itself does not lay claim to apostolic authority or have any such self-understanding. On the contrary, a first-century writer or compiler who wrote with such confidence likely assumed the apostolic origin of the content, and whoever later added “apostles” to the title reflected that same understanding.

baptism. If someone on a bed (*kline*) of sickness or of death requested baptism but physically could not make the journey, pouring water came to be permitted. Cyprian discusses such a scenario and defends *aspersio* (sprinkling) “when necessity compels,” though his defense indicates that it was not an uncontroversial position.⁷

In light of the situations described above, the practice of pouring water may be regarded as theologically sensitive, reasonable, even biblical. The emergency procedure, moreover, testifies to the importance of the original ideal. In the absence of adequate water, the early Christians did not simply forego the water rite or suggest that the words alone would suffice. To worry about pouring water three times in the name of the Trinity points to the high value placed on water baptism and on the form of words accompanying it, as well as the essential role of it all in Christian initiation. The emergency was not intended to undermine but to preserve the ideal.

Despite the best intentions of the first generation, however, the emergency formula gradually supplanted the original ideal. It is not difficult to imagine how the transition could occur. If 25 miles round trip is too far for a disabled person to walk to find ample water for immersion, and affusion is permissible, then what about a ten-mile trip for someone who has a mere limp? If sprinkling “counts” for a person on her deathbed, then what about for the person who is sick with a moderate fever? If it is frigid outside, then pouring water surely would be better than dunking. Thus, over the course of the next millennium, pouring and later sprinkling became the typical mode of baptism in the Western Church. In the case of baptism, as in many other areas, what begins as an emergency method “when necessity compels” easily develops into the new norm for the sake of convenience. The original practice becomes inconvenient and then obsolete.

⁷ For primary-source quotations and commentary, including the passage from Cyprian’s *Epistle* 75, on early Christian exceptions to immersion, see Everett Ferguson, *Early Christian Speak: Faith and Life in the First Three Centuries*, rev. ed. (Abilene: ACU Press, 1987), 45–54. The other famous exception to baptism in the early church was in the extreme situation of persecution. A catechumen (a believer who was being instructed in the faith in preparation for baptism) who confessed Christ at the cost of his life was considered to have been baptized in blood, a retroactive exemption. On the baptism of blood, see Bryan M. Litfin, *Early Christian Martyr Stories: An Evangelical Introduction with New Translations* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 104–5 n. 17.

Lord's Day

As the months went by in 2020, churches reopened their doors to a very different situation. The virus lingered, and so did the emergency procedures. For some believers, the livestream or podcast has remained the new normal. For many who have returned to the physical assembly, individualized, self-administered communion remains the practice, as do the physical barriers of distance and masks.

The reality of the post-pandemic or reopened church raises several questions that can be better answered in hindsight. First of all, were these emergency procedures sound? With regard to the assembly, it seems reasonable to suggest that, in a situation of mandated lockdowns, the use of livestreaming and teleconferencing technology was a good short-term solution. In the absence of physical presence, to see and hear worship leaders through a screen is a sensible option. Alternatively, a family or household could conduct their own worship without the aid of electronic media. Many families experimented with both or even a mixture of the two.

These alternative practices of the Lord's Day do not reflect their fullness, of course. But they were always imperfect and incomplete in the pre-pandemic larger assembly, too. We are not yet physically with the saints in the eschatological kingdom. It is all an anticipation of a better day of worship without pain, sin, sickness, or death. Our situation is not ideal, so emergency procedures must be implemented.

The real question is how we regard and treat those emergency procedures. Society in general and churches in particular must carefully assess the new practices that emerged during the pandemic. And then a distinction may be made between, on the one hand, good practices that should be continued and, on the other hand, emergency procedures that, though they were necessary at the time and many people have now become accustomed to them, should not become the norm. The language and handling of the things in the latter category should reflect that these are less than ideal circumstances and only temporary solutions.

The problem is that such emergency procedures, although received reluctantly at first, quickly became customary, and the language used to describe them was less that of a stopgap measure than of normalization and therefore

permanence. These alternatives, as substitutes for the Lord’s Day assembly and the Lord’s Supper, are certainly convenient, which is why there is such a risk that they will become the new normal.

First, consider what was proposed as the conventional substitute for the assembly: sleeping in and staying home to watch TV on a Sunday morning. Although it was done with good intentions, it does not take much imagination to see how that could go wrong and lead to a high rate of attrition. Rather than emphasizing that it was a temporary, emergency solution and that people who are comfortable going to the grocery store and restaurants should also be comfortable in the pew, many churches instead indiscriminately reassured members who stayed home. The key word here is “indiscriminately.” To be sure, the aged and those with co-morbidities were more justified in staying away from all crowds—whether at a grocery store, restaurant, or church assembly. But to the degree that churches encouraged members to stay away from the assembly—without distinguishing various risks or mentioning involvement in other activities—these same churches all but guaranteed that they would permanently lose members to those other activities. It is analogous to an ancient evangelist, with a river in full view one hundred yards away, telling an able-bodied candidate to sit tight because he has a jug of water ready for pouring. The author of the *Didache* would be horrified that the extraordinary stopgap has become the ordinary practice, though his successors over a millennium later would more likely regard the decision as reasonable.

It is necessary to assess the practice of church as livestream or podcast. The advantages during a time of lockdown and lingering pandemic are obvious. Livestream is a reasonable alternative to not meeting at all, and it ought to remain an alternative precisely for those individuals who, for health reasons, cannot assemble. The church has always had shut-ins. These are not people who go out to eat or attend concerts. Rather, they are people who, because of advanced age or other severe medical challenges, find it extremely difficult or dangerous to leave home and do so rarely and almost always for medical visits or necessities. In addition to shut-ins, there are some who must work a job whose hours are inflexible. The livestream should remain accessible and well-executed for them. The livestream should never have been for the healthy young person for whom the Lord’s Day assembly seems to be the only social restriction.

Should churches continue to publicize their liturgy on the internet, that is, to make it available to all beyond the borders of the local congregation? Some churches did this already before COVID. Most churches do it now. Again, there are advantages to continuing the practice. For instance, many churches testify to the people reached and eventually even brought to Christ in faraway places through the livestreamed worship. The church should always be ready to employ technology in a way that enhances the work of the kingdom and glorifies God. At the same time, ours is a technophilic age, which means we tend to be enamored with technology, to see only its potential benefits, and to use it without restriction and with no questions asked. In light of this reality, as part of the present assessment, it would be prudent to consider potentially negative consequences, some of which churches have already witnessed. The following points are raised not as premises in a decisive argument—much less as a bludgeon against a church that decides to livestream—but as points worth considering and addressing as churches move forward to mainstream the livestream. These points relate to a livestream intended both for members of the local congregation as well as for the broad, global public, an audience distinction that is difficult to maintain and may be functionally meaningless once the content is in cyberspace.

First of all, the church is, by definition, an assembly of people. The ancient Greek *ekklesia* was an assembly of persons “called out” from their private spheres of home and work, gathered for a political or civic purpose. The early Christian appropriation of this word expresses an essential aspect of Christian identity—namely, a people called out from their private lives, gathered together for a liturgical purpose.⁸ As Hans Küng explains, “Ekklesia, like ‘congregation’, means both the actual *process of congregating* and the *congregated community* itself.... It becomes an *ekklesia* by the fact of a repeated concrete event, people coming together and congregating, in particular congregating for the purpose of worshipping God.”⁹ Likewise, Stanley Grenz observes, “We may

⁸ We should avoid the etymological fallacy, on which see, e.g., Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 130. At the same time, an assembly of people is gathered or called forth *from* elsewhere *for* a purpose. In addition to the Greek usage, Ed Gallagher reminds us of the Hellenistic Jewish usage of *ekklesia* in LXX (see his article in this issue).

⁹ Hans Küng, *The Church* (Garden City: Image Books, 1976), 120.

appropriately speak of the church as being ‘gathered to worship.’”¹⁰ Everett Ferguson finds the great number of passages in the New Testament about Christians coming together to be “impressive.”¹¹ It is hard to be the church (*ekklesia*)—which means a congregation of people—by oneself, at least on a recurring basis.

Besides church, another prominent Pauline metaphor for the people of God is body. One body has many parts or members, and the whole body is greater than the sum of its parts and can accomplish things that any member by itself could not (1 Corinthians 12; Eph 4:11–16). Paul contrasts the one body of Christ with individual, separated members. Those single members are part of the body inasmuch as they are connected with it and working together with it. The body (Latin, *corpus*) is, in contrast to its individual members, a *corporate* reality. It is hard to be the body, a functioning corporate entity, if it has been dismembered.

In his discussion of the variety of early Christian metaphors used to describe the covenant people of God, Everett Ferguson notes, “What is immediately evident in these images for the church is that they all emphasize the *communal* aspect of Christian faith and life.”¹² Like other metaphors used to describe God’s covenant people, church and body imply literal togetherness. That bond of unity, however, becomes a more abstract metaphor as one considers the people of God around the world and throughout the ages. In other words, one may object that physical presence is not needed to unite believers who are physically separated. But that physical separation is also a less than ideal situation experienced this side of the eschaton. It is mitigated by believers joining together on a regular basis in a smaller, local instantiation of that church catholic and body universal, participating as one in the same spiritual food and drink as God’s people of all times and places.

¹⁰ Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994), 638. Cf. Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 137–39.

¹¹ Ferguson, *Church of Christ*, 232.

¹² Everett Ferguson, ed., *Understandings of the Church*, Ad Fontes (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 3. They include “body of Christ, bride of Christ, family, house and sanctuary, people of God, and ‘the earth and all that is in it.’” His summary of early Christian metaphors is found in *ibid.*, 1–20. For an analysis of the various terminology and metaphors used in the New Testament, see Ferguson, *Church of Christ*, 71–134.

The body metaphor also reflects the centrality of the incarnation, for the church is not just any body—it is the body of Christ. When the Word became flesh (John 1:14), it was something to be heard, seen, and touched (1 John 1:1). The spiritual connection among the body’s members is important, but it is incomplete without physical connection. The body of Christ is something to be heard, seen, and touched. Mediated through screens, the members of the body are presented to one another as disembodied, virtual selves. This increased tendency to experience life, including its most important realities, through screens, is consistent with Charles Taylor’s observation that “we relate to the world as more disembodied beings than our ancestors” and that ours is an “excarnational” age.¹³

For an emergency when absence is necessary, teleconferencing technology is a reasonable substitute for physical presence. As presence, though heard and seen, it is a disembodied presence. Paul’s letters functioned as his vicarious presence, but they paled in comparison to his bodily presence, indicated by the longing, repeatedly expressed, to see his fellow believers in person (Rom 1:11–12; 15:23–29, 32; 1 Cor 11:34; 2 Cor 1:15–16; 7:6–7, 13; 1 Thess 2:17–18). Physical presence is simply more effective for communicating and expressing the truth and implications of the gospel.¹⁴

What humans understand intuitively about the importance of physical presence is also reinforced by sociological analysis. In his book on interaction and ritual, Randall Collins emphasizes the necessity of bodily presence for ritual. Could “a wedding ceremony or a funeral be conducted over a telephone?” he asks. “The very idea seems inappropriate.”¹⁵ Collins wrote this book long before the coronavirus pandemic and the widespread teleconferencing that combines audio and video. But, in light of the television broadcasts of religious services, Collins writes, “Broadcast religious services do not displace personal attendance, but reinforce and enhance it.... Distance media can provide some

¹³ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 141, 288, 614–15.

¹⁴ Even when Paul seems to prefer an epistle to a physical visit, it is because the visit is so much more effective than a letter in inflicting pain (2 Cor 1:23–24; 13:1–2, 10).

¹⁵ Randall Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains*, Princeton Studies in Cultural Sociology (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 54. Channeling Collins, Robert N. Bellah reiterates the same point in *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 278–79, 658 n. 36.

of the sense of shared attention and emotion, which give a feeling of attraction, membership, and respect. The strongest effects are reserved, however, for full bodily assembly.”¹⁶ Collins acknowledges that, in the future, there may be an increase in the use of distance media as physical presence succumbs to economic or practical pressures. Still, he predicts, “The more that human social activities are carried out by distance media, at low levels of IR [interaction ritual] intensity, the less solidarity people will feel; the less respect they will have for shared [symbolic] objects; and the less enthusiastic personal motivation they will have in the form of EE [emotional energy].”¹⁷

The livestreamed worship should be seen exactly for what it is—an ersatz. The emergency procedure ought to be executed well for those who need it: the local sick and shut-in members, those who must work an hourly job during the assembly, and those who reside in a faraway place. Those in another county, state, or country—including those who came to Christ via the livestream—should be encouraged to find and connect with a local body of believers, even as they continue to benefit from viewing the distant livestream. The ideal is to meet with the assembled body. Short of that possibility, churches that provide a livestream would be wise to regard it as a stopgap measure. It is not a practice of convenience for someone who has supplanted the Lord’s Day assembly with something of subordinate importance. If church history, both ancient and recent, has taught anything, it is that the matter of convenience is a genuinely slippery slope.

An important aspect of regarding the livestream as an emergency measure is simply to treat it as such. This treatment is reflected principally in the language used about it. For example, it may seem subtle, but there is a vast difference between, on the one hand, “For those who cannot be here, we hope you are blessed by tuning in online, but we also hope you can join us in person soon,” and, on the other hand, “We are so happy that you are worshipping online. Watching the livestream is just as good. Staying home does not indicate a lack of faithfulness. No one is to judge,” and the like. The latter set of words does not sound like emergency stopgap language, yet something like it has been

¹⁶ Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains*, 60.

¹⁷ Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains*, 64. Collins notes (*ibid.*, 54) that these levels generated by interactive media can be studied experimentally. His entire section on bodily presence (53–64) is worth reading and relevant to my point here.

heard in many churches. For many months, well-intentioned church leaders urged members to stay home and to feel good about it. Before COVID, I have never known a church that felt compelled to tell people who were truly sick or unable to attend that their absence was permissible; it was never questioned. Whom exactly were churches now reassuring with these new messages that absence is good? Was that message for the feeble and frail or for the fearful and indolent? It seems possible that, in some circumstances and for some people, forsaking the assembly could indeed indicate or contribute to a lack of faithfulness. At any rate, language goes a long way in shaping perception.

Another way to reinforce the subordinate status of the livestream, even for all the good it may do, is never to allow it to shape the assembly itself in a meaningful way, especially in a way that is inexpedient to the aims of the in-person assembly. That is, “production value” should not be a leading concern of those planning and leading worship, particularly if it gets in the way of the people actually present. For instance, if the liturgy calls for a time of quiet reflection and confession free from distraction while the production team is asking how it looks on TV, or if the preacher is told not to walk off the podium toward the congregation because the lighting is bad, then perhaps the priorities are imbalanced. What if the church spontaneously gathers around in a tight circle for prayer, but the event sends the cameramen scrambling for a good angle? Will it impede the ones praying to hear a drone hovering above them? Or what if something very personal—such as confession of sin or mention of a health matter—needs to be brought before the assembly? Will the fact that it is broadcast around the globe impede openness in person?

The medium is the message, and Christian worship—like family Thanksgiving dinner or Christmas morning—is not meant for the TV. Imagine a family member asking, “Now how will this look on TV?” It’s one thing to film the kids opening gifts, but quite another to order them to wear photogenic clothing, sit in predetermined spots, and make constant eye contact with the camera. If that is to become the norm in worship, we will have lost something sacred in the process. With deepest respect and gratitude to technology teams for their professional and selfless service in churches, Socrates was correct: No technology team should be making decisions about the use of the technology.¹⁸

¹⁸ Plato *Phaedrus* 274E, trans. Harold North Fowler, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1914), 562–63 (translation modified): “Most

The livestream can and should be done well, but the tail mustn’t wag the dog. The media broadcast mustn’t dictate what happens in the assembly.¹⁹

For these reasons, and many more, the old adage rings true: *unus Christianus nullus Christianus* (one Christian is no Christian). Hicks sums up well the importance of the assembling of the saints:

The assembly shapes communal identity, forms a concrete manifestation of the body of Christ as community, empowers discipleship and sustains the people of God as they are nourished by divine presence. Assembling—whenever or wherever we assemble (not only on the Lord’s Day)—is a means of grace, a transforming encounter.²⁰

Lord’s Supper

The phenomenon of drive-thru communion preceded the COVID pandemic by many years, and, at the time, most serious Christians were not persuaded. In 2014, National Public Radio reported on a drive-in church in Daytona Beach.²¹ In the style of a drive-in theater, members pulled up in their cars to watch the proceedings, the bread and wine served in pre-packaged kits. As the reporter noted, “Liturgical purists might balk at a worship style in which even Communion isn’t very communal.” She added, “Those who want human interaction can then gather in the fellowship hall.” Fellowship, it would seem, is an unnecessary addition to the worship assembly and its central act. Most observers were not aware that the practices balked at in 2014 would lay the groundwork for what became mainstream in 2020—holy communion without human interaction.

When churches were closed to the public, some chose to abstain from the Eucharist altogether. For Roman Catholics and others who might believe the elements must be consecrated and served or administered in person by the

artistic (*technikotate*) Theuth, one man has the ability to beget arts (*technes*), but the ability to judge of their usefulness or harmfulness to their users belongs to another.”

¹⁹ For a classic statement of what television did to culture, see Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, 20th Anniversary Edition (New York: Penguin, 2005). On the relationship to worship in particular, see 114–24.

²⁰ Hicks, et al., *A Gathered People*, 16.

²¹ Amy Kiley, “Roadside Service: Drive-In Church Brings God to Your Car,” at <https://www.npr.org/2014/03/03/285278319/roadside-service-drive-in-church-brings-god-to-your-car>.

rightly ordained bishop or priest, then perhaps abstention is necessary.²² But for my family, when we heard the words of institution via the livestream, and then we repeated those words in my family room, I believe that whatever happens in the Eucharist was in fact happening, and so we kept the feast. In emergencies, you still practice the sacraments as able. Even Roman Catholics allow that, in emergencies, a layman can administer baptism. The *Didache*'s affusion, the martyr's baptism of blood—these all “count,” that is, God bestows the benefits. The church never said, if you cannot baptize in the preferred way, then abstain from baptism. So, rather than abstain from Eucharist, one may recognize that self-administration is an emergency situation—not ideal—but it is better than nothing.

The stopgap may have been permissible, but something was missing. As with the language of *church* and *body*, one of the essential aspects of the Eucharist is reflected in the terminology of *communion* (1 Cor 10:16). Like worship in general, the Lord's Supper is communion on two levels—with God and with fellow believers. Thus, by definition, communion is to be done with others. The word *koinonia*, typically translated as *communion* in 1 Corinthians 10, means fellowship and sharing. One cannot easily share and have fellowship alone.

The convenience of allowing the shut-in to self-administer the Eucharist should not keep the congregation from ministering to them. That is, reliance on the livestream could be used as a justification for depriving the chronically sick or infirm of the blessing of physical human presence. The solution, from at least the second century, was for the church to send the Christian community to the shut-in—namely, for the deacons to bring the Lord's Supper to the unavoidably absent.²³ If today's church would deliver communion and community—with hygienic precautions—to the doorstep or living room of those who cannot attend, the truly infirm would be built up and perhaps the others who really can attend would return when they see how they are loved and missed.

²² For a well-stated argument in this direction, see Brad East, “Sacraments, Technology, and Streaming Worship in a Pandemic,” *Mere Orthodoxy* (April 2, 2020), at <https://mereorthodoxy.com/churches-livestream-public-worship/>.

²³ Justin Martyr, *1 Apology* 67, in *Writings of Saint Justin Martyr*, trans. Thomas B. Falls, *The Fathers of the Church* (New York: Christian Heritage, 1948), 107.

But communion has not quite returned to normal even for the people meeting again in person. Upon return to the assembly, most churches have retained the individual packets. It remains, then, a self-serving and self-administered Eucharist. In many churches, an ordained priest serves the participants. In other churches, the body of believers carries out that priestly duty by passing the tray and serving one another. In both cases, there is the give and take of mutual sharing, the speaking of redemptive words to one another. The individual packet, however, removes the opportunity for what little horizontal communion actually took place during the Lord's Supper. In addition, what most churches have provided during the pandemic stretches the meaning of the words edible and potable, a fact that should have guaranteed the packet's transience.²⁴ These are temporary measures for times of crisis. For churches that deem it necessary to continue this emergency practice, perhaps they could take advantage of the unity expressed when everyone waits and takes the elements simultaneously as one body. Such a practice could transcend the exigencies of the moment and proclaim truth long after the emergency and its other procedures have passed.

Conclusion

The “present necessity” of the coronavirus pandemic has called for certain emergency procedures in society at large and in the church. Christian leaders, traveling in uncharted territory, implemented new practices with the best of intentions to preserve both the physical and spiritual health of God's people. That challenge proved formidable. But now is the time to look back and take stock of what happened in order to move forward.

It is first of all important simply to acknowledge the category of ecclesiological emergency and the status of the solutions that are proposed. If some Christians are inclined to be critical of substitutes for immersion, then they should be equally skeptical about the ease with which their own churches have introduced innovations into the assembly and communion.

But it may be that some emergency procedures are so radical that they strike at the very heart of the sacramental concept. *Ekklesia* and *koinonia*, like *baptisma*, mean something. If the assembly is done without assembling and if

²⁴ I refer to the Styrofoam wafer and grape-flavored drink. Their container—more precisely, the action of prying it open—is also not conducive to the liturgical ambience.

communion is observed without communing, it differs little from immersion being practiced without immersing. Stopgaps are sometimes necessary. But if the temporary substitute is continued unnecessarily, then the stopgap becomes the norm and the church risks forever losing something meaningful.

And so the church would be wise to consider principles for emergency practices, both for this pandemic and for any future unforeseen crises. I suggest the following for starters. Any development forced on the church because of external contingencies and exigencies should be directed in such a way to reflect as far as possible the ideal—biblically, theologically, and functionally. New practices that arise must be evaluated and distinguished into two categories. On the one hand, those stopgap measures that are less than ideal—especially those that the church at large would have loathed to implement before the crisis—must be treated and spoken about in such a way that they are understood by the church to be temporary, less than ideal, and therefore dispensable. They should never be allowed to supplant the ideal and become the norm. On the other hand, some practices that arise during a crisis could turn out to be better liturgical expressions of biblical and theological truth and have better practical outcomes. Such practices may be valued for what they contribute, and therefore they ought to be retained. If the outward forms do not correspond to inward realities, or if those outward forms fulfill no theological or ecclesiological function, then perhaps they can be exchanged for something else.

May God grant to his church wisdom, in the midst of social chaos and political confusion, to distinguish between these two categories. And may God's people remain free and eager to come together in the "fullness of the blessing of Christ" (Rom 15:29).

Comfort My People: Early Modern Protestant Approaches to Congregational Comfort and Pastoral Calling in Times of Plague

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Basic Issues of Comfort, Plague, and Pastoral Calling

Perspective in history, as in art, is often a matter of proportion, distance, and viewing angle. Sometimes the experience of contemporary events, like a global pandemic, can provide such a viewing angle and inspire a new interest in familiar historical events and ideas, offering new opportunities to enrich our historical perspective. Such is the case when exploring Christian theology and practice of pastoral ministry in response to seasons of plague in the early modern period. How did pastors and theologians in the early modern period consider their calling and ministry? What did that mean in seasons of plague? Just as many pastors and church leaders are today, early modern pastors were frequently perplexed by pastoral and theological questions about how to conduct a consistent and faithful pastoral ministry before, during, and after a plague outbreak. Plague outbreaks sharpened doctrinal formulation as well as shaped pastoral practice in the early modern period. By highlighting these issues, we can gain a sense of perspective and a point of comparison for our own discussions today. A study of the past will not solve present pressing issues in the church, but it is my hope that this contribution might foster further thoughtful conversations doctrinally, pastorally, and practically.

I will briefly consider these questions to stimulate our own reflection: in general, what is the pastoral calling and duty with respect to comforting congregants? The Lutheran theologian Friedrich Balduin (1575–1627) is helpful

at this point not only for his influence on later Lutheran casuistry but also upon pastors and theologians across the Protestant spectrum throughout the early modern period. Next, what is the nature of public assembly, communion, and Christian comfort? What were the range of practices regarding the sacrament of communion and its function within pastoral care to the sick? A consideration of a few Lutheran and Reformed theologians opens a range of views and issues involved in ministering communion to the sick and the importance of the public assembly of the congregation.

But first, a few general points are in order. Both Lutheran and Reformed confessional documents emphasize Christian comfort. Luther's *Large Catechism* states, "There was no counsel, help, or comfort until this only eternal Son of God in his unfathomable goodness had compassion upon our misery and wretchedness, and came from heaven to help us."¹ Furthermore, "Everything therefore, in the Christian Church is ordered to the end that we shall daily obtain there nothing but the forgiveness of sin through the Word and signs, to comfort and encourage our consciences as long as we live here."² Similarly among the Reformed, the Heidelberg Catechism question 1 asks,

What is your only comfort in life and in death?

That I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself, but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ: who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil; that he protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.³

Comfort and its connection to Christ and to his Church are basic points in both confessional traditions. Both traditions emphasize pastoral ministry and

¹ *Large Catechism (LC)*, I.29, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, trans. Charles Arand et. al., (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

² LC, I.55.

³ *Heidelberg Catechism* 1, in *Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 2:429; cf. Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 6th ed. (1919), 1:539.

an engaged practice of pastoral visitation. However, there were different conceptions of how this shared emphasis on comfort should be worked out in pastoral practice and congregational care of the sick in times of plague.

Now, with respect to the history of plague in Europe, it is indisputable *that* a major disease or series of diseases swept over the continent intermittently from the fourteenth century well into the eighteenth century, which contemporaries called the pestilence or plague (Latin: *pestis* or *plaga*). Among epidemiologists there are still lively debates about such deadly times as to *what* the precise etiological cause of so many deaths was.⁴ The bacterium *Yersinia pestis* is commonly stated as the cause, given the bubonic, pneumonic, and septicemic forms of plague. Among the infected, these forms of *Yersinia pestis* had a mortality rate of approximately 80, 95, and 100 percent in the medieval period, respectively; in the modern period, the mortality rate ranges from 30 to 100 percent if left untreated; with early antibiotic treatment, 11 percent.⁵ The primary sign was distinctive: lymph nodes swollen into hard, golfball-sized bulges in the groin, armpit, and on the neck called *buboes*. From first exposure to final breath was around three days to a week.

The severity and frequency of plague outbreaks are also debated in scholarly literature. There is not agreement among medievalists and medical historians on the percentage of population loss in the infamous outbreak of the Black Death (1347–1353). Estimates of the death toll from the Black Death with respect to the projected medieval population in Europe ranges from a conservative 30 percent to an even starker figure of 60 percent of the population.⁶ It has been demonstrated in a variety of ways that in some cities the death toll was much higher, others lower; and the same could be said

⁴ See Andrew Noymer's review article, "Contesting the Cause and Severity of the Black Death: A Review Essay," *Population and Development Review* 33/3 (2007): 616–27. On whether or not the Black Death was *Yersinia Pestis*, see Noymer, 620; cf. Didier Raoult, et al., "Molecular Identification by 'Suicide PCR' of *Yersinia pestis* as the Agent of Medieval Black Death," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 97, no. 23 (2000): 12800–3.

⁵ Noymer, "Contesting," 619; World Health Organization, "Plague" (Oct. 31, 2017) <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/plague> accessed Oct. 24, 2021.

⁶ Noymer, "Contesting," 624.

regionally.⁷ Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the plague may not have been as virulent as the medieval strains, but it was no less terrifying. Whenever and wherever it occurred, the population loss in a relatively short period of time was staggering. In Italy, the Low Countries, the Alsace region of France and Germany, or Switzerland, or Spain, the death toll ranged from 8 percent of the population to as high as 43 percent depending on the outbreak and population density.⁸ The frequency of plague was also of concern. For example, in Switzerland between 1560 and 1670, there were outbreaks every decade or so impacting anywhere from 30 to 150 communities each time.⁹ Sometimes there were two or three extended periods of plague within a decade in a region. Imagine being a pastor and losing 20 percent of your congregation or town every three years.

Plagues and pestilential fevers were more feared and disruptive than famine or war due to its seemingly fortuitous appearance and severity. Other sources for information on the plague were contemporary accounts of plague in popular sources like plays, poetry, and music, as well as academic sources like theological treatises, legal texts, civil histories, and medical texts, to name a few. There is a broad array of theological literature, such as biblical commentaries, sermons, academic disputations, and occasional pamphlets. Our sources for consideration select a few theological treatises representing works of moral theology and pastoral theology.

What we call moral theology or pastoral theology in a seminary today were termed *christianae ethices*, *theologia moralis*, or *casus conscientiae*, that is, moral casuistry, in the reformation and post-reformation period. Moral casuistry is a genre of systematic moral reasoning that arose in the medieval monasteries and university theology faculties for the training of priests and confessors.¹⁰ Manuals of casuistry in the early modern period did not function in exactly the same way among Roman Catholics and Protestants given different forms and

⁷ Guido Alfani, "Plague in Seventeenth-Century Europe and the Decline of Italy: An Epidemiological Hypothesis," *European Review of Economic History* 17/4 (2013): 408–30.

⁸ Alfani, "Plague," 411.

⁹ Edward A. Eckert, "Boundary Formation and Diffusion of Plague: Swiss Epidemics from 1562–1669," *Annales de Démographie Historique* (1978): 53.

¹⁰ E.g., Astesanus, O.F.M. (d. 1330), *Summa de casibus conscientiae* (Strasbourg: Johann Mentelin, 1469).

practices of confession, contrition, and repentance, but these manuals were all geared towards the pastor's calling in the identification of sin and the goal of holy conduct in their congregation. For an example of its role among the Lutherans, Benjamin Mayes fittingly observed, "Casuistic categorizing of knowledge is especially appropriate to seventeenth-century Lutheran pastoral care, for it is here that the teaching of the gospel comes into contact with the many struggles and situations of life."¹¹ A similar point could be made from the English Puritans. J. F. Keenan demonstrated that in the European context between 1560 and 1660 high casuistry "grew out of two contexts: public policy and private piety."¹² Taken in a broad sense, whether Roman Catholic, Reformed, or Lutheran, casuistic literature developed in tandem with various growing needs for pointed practical theology and moral deliberation throughout the seventeenth century.¹³

Besides moral instruction from within their confessional boundaries and a kind of public discourse, casuistry was also an opportunity to explore rival traditions on specific debated practical questions. In the Dutch context, for example, in his *A Treatise on the Plague, or a Spiritual Antidote for the Plague*, the Reformed theologian Gijsbert Voetius (1589–1676) engaged German Lutheran ministerial manuals, Roman Catholic confessional treatises, Italian medical tracts, and Jesuit conceptions of plague ministry as a form of Christian martyrdom.¹⁴ The tract originated as an academic disputation in the context of training theology students at Utrecht University, but it was republished for further

¹¹ Benjamin T. G. Mayes, *Counsel and Conscience: Lutheran Casuistry and Moral Reasoning after the Reformation* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 39.

¹² J. F. Keenan, "William Perkins (1558–1602) and the Birth of British Casuistry," in *The Context of Casuistry*, ed. J. F. Keenan and T. A. Shannon (Washington, D. C.: Georgetown University Press, 1995), 105–30, here 107.

¹³ E.g., among the Reformed, see William Ames, *De Conscientia et Ejus Jure, vel Casibus Libri Quinque* (Amsterdam: Johannes Jansson, 1631); among Lutherans, Friedrich Balduin, *Tractatus ... De ... Casibus nimirum Conscientiae* (Wittenberg: Paulus Helwigius, 1628); among Roman Catholics, Francisco de Toledo, *Summa Casuum Conscientiae, sive de Instructione Sacerdotum, libri septem* (Constance: Nicolaus Kalt, 1600).

¹⁴ For the English translation, see Voetius, *A Treatise on the Plague, or a Spiritual Antidote for the Plague*, in *Faith in the Time of Plague*, trans. and ed. Stephen M. Coleman and Todd M. Rester (Glenside, PA: Westminster Seminary Press, 2021), 69–122; henceforth *FTP*.

circulation among an educated readership.¹⁵ Voetius in this regard was not unique in this timeframe but illustrates a general academic posture of wide-ranging engagement with confessionally divergent views in part driven by the pressing need of the hour. And while it may have originated in academic contexts, frequently works of casuistry made their way into public circulation and discourse.

Public crises often reveal the boundaries and limits of a vocational calling. In the early modern period, the public health crisis of plague also generated a moral crisis regarding Christian duties and vocation during an outbreak. The Latin medical adage *cito, longe, tarde*, “flee quickly, far, and return slowly,” was extremely controversial; perhaps more controversial than masking is in the United States during COVID-19 at this time of writing. As general advice to avoid all infection, this adage upended congregational and social life because the limits of the advice were vague. Who precisely could flee in the context of plague? Could a pastor flee the plague and abandon his congregation? Could an employer abandon their workers when fleeing a city infected with plague? Who was responsible for the poor, the infirm, and the aged? What were the limits of the magistrate’s office in time of crisis? What of a pastor’s office? All these and more were debated in early modern theological reflections on plague using the genre of moral theology and casuistry.

Pastoral Calling, Comfort, and the Sick in the Lutheran Friedrich Balduin

On the question of pastoral calling and congregational comfort, the Lutheran pastor and theologian Friedrich Balduin is a foundational representative figure of Lutheran casuistry and pastoral theology. Balduin taught theology at Wittenberg from 1607 until his death. In his work *Brief Instruction for Ministers of the Word written from the first epistle of Paul to Timothy* (1623), he included a chapter on comforting the sorrowful.¹⁶ Balduin began by stating:

¹⁵ Voetius, *Selectarum Disputationum*, 5 vols. (vols. 1–4, Utrecht: Johannes Waesberg, 1648–1667; vol. 5, Utrecht: Antonius Smytegelt, 1669), 4:292–325; idem, “Tractatus de peste, seu pestis antidoto spiritali,” in *Variorum Tractatus Theologici de Peste* (Leiden: Johannes Elsevirius, 1655), 139–249.

¹⁶ Friedrich Balduinus, “De Modo consolandi Tristes,” in *Brevis Institutio Ministrorum verbi, potissimum ex priore Epistola D. Pauli ad Timotheum Conscripita* (Wittenberg: Georgius Mullerus, 1623), 175–82.

A good part of the ministry is comfort (παράκλησις), for which reason the Holy Spirit, to whom this office belongs, is called the παράκλητος, the comforter ... now when it is granted to us, not only to believe in Christ, but also to suffer for him (Phil 1:29), even still our flesh would be impatient with these sufferings, so there comfort is necessary, which works patience so that we would do the will of God (Heb 10:36). So then God himself enjoined upon ministers [the tasks of] comforting his people and speaking to the heart of Jerusalem (Isa 40:1). Therefore, the office of the minister is called paracletic or nouthetic (from the term νουθησια).¹⁷

Balduin had argued elsewhere that the ministry of the Word is primary in the pastoral office.¹⁸ Here he argued that the other core aspect of ministry is comforting God's people. He elaborated upon the source of comfort: "All comfort that mitigates sorrow must be sought from the Holy Scriptures. If any is brought from another source it is adulterated and ineffective."¹⁹ By contrast there are no effective comforts unless "the soul of the afflicted has been first purged from sins."²⁰ Scripture is both the source of conviction of sin and comfort in grace. In this regard, comfort has both a public and private aspect; the public ministry of the Word in preaching, and the private ministry of comforting the sick. Where there is no posture of full repentance in response to God's Word, there can be no full comfort.

Christians were to take comfort from the Word of God and participation in the Lord's Supper. In Balduin's exposition of the significance of the holy supper, it is the comfort of the Word, the process of repentance, and the celebration of the Eucharist that converge. Consider his point that "the holy supper must not be denied to the sick in private dwellings, provided they would have the rest [of the other characteristics], that is, provided that the sick person is truly penitent and desirous of this food and has his reason, so that he understands what is happening."²¹ In his chapter on the sacrament of communion,

¹⁷ "De Modo," 175.

¹⁸ "De Modo," 170–175.

¹⁹ "De Modo," 176.

²⁰ "De Modo," 179.

²¹ "De Modo," 234; cf. Guilielmus Bucanus (d. 1603), locus 48, q.125 "Quo loco est administranda?" in *Institutiones Theologicae, seu Locorum Communium Christianae Religionis* (Berne: Jean & Isaias le Preux, 1605), 788; Wolfgang Musculus, *Loci Communes* (Basel: Sebastian Henricpetri, 1599), 370.

Balduin goes on to note a debate: should the holy supper be served to the sick? Albeit with polemical intent, Balduin helpfully describes, by their lack of full consensus, a range of opinions among Reformed theologians on the question of whether the sacrament could be administered to the sick. The *Sacramentarii*, as Balduin called certain Reformed theologians, did not allow the holy supper to be administered outside the assembly for public worship. On one hand, Bucanus and Musculus rejected private administration of the supper. And on the other, Balduin claims, Beza took a more moderate approach.

Bucanus, however, did acknowledge that in the ancient Church, the supper was brought from the assembly of the Church to the sick at home and in hospitals. But this was done, Bucanus said, “without superstition,” that is, not with a view towards transubstantiation, “and not with any other goal than as a symbol of concord and consensus in doctrine and in a full profession.”²² However, since the custom degenerated into superstition, in his local context he asserted that this practice must be set aside since Roman Catholics argued that without the Supper, Christians do not go to heaven.²³ For Bucanus, differentiation from the Roman Catholic position required a much more limited practice.

Balduin would agree with his Reformed counterpart on these two points of administering the Holy Supper: it was not a *sine qua non* for admission to heaven and it should not be taken with an *opere operato* view. But in disagreement with some of the Reformed, he asserted that since it is useful for comfort it should be administered to the sick privately. Balduin also noted that, in contrast to Musculus and Bucanus, on the other hand, a Reformed theologian such as Beza granted that the supper could be brought from the church assembly to the sick.²⁴ In fact, Balduin argues from the *Life of Calvin* that Beza administered the supper to Calvin in his own home, indicating that in Balduin’s view for Beza this practice might have prudential exceptions rather than

²² Balduin, *Brevis Institutio*, 235.

²³ Bucanus, *Institutiones*, 788.

²⁴ Balduin, *Brevis Institutio*, 235; cf. Beza, *Quaestionum et Responsionum Christianarum Libellus*, 2 vols. (Geneva: Eustathius Vignon, 1571, 1577), qq240–41, 2:131–133; idem, *Tractationes Theologicae*, 3 vols. (Geneva: Eustathius Vignon, 1582), 3:363–4. Subsequent references of Beza’s *Quaestiones et Responsiones* will be from the 1582 Vignon printing of the *Tractationes Theologicae*.

absolute principal prohibitions.²⁵ Despite Balduin's assertion, it should be noted that Beza's account of Calvin's last days only mentions that the Genevan ministers shared a common meal together *pour marque d'une étroite amitié*, "as a mark of our friendship," on the evening of May 19, 1564, several days before Calvin's death.²⁶ The account does not say the ministers and Calvin ate the Lord's Supper, *la Cène du Seigneur*, as it does in almost every other mention in Beza's account, but only that the ministers dined together. The last time Beza explicitly stated that Calvin partook of the Lord's Supper from his own hand was on April 2, 1564, on Easter Sunday.²⁷ We will have occasion to return to Beza's views momentarily.

What are the limits for Balduin when serving communion? In his work entitled *Cases of Conscience*, Balduin expounded the intersection of the pastoral ministry, comfort, and right administration of the holy supper.²⁸ Besides questions that relate to the participation of the impenitent in the supper, many of the cases address the administration of the Lord's Supper to the sick. For example, in the second case the question is whether a pastor ought to serve communion to people in the throes of death who, due to disease have nearly lost all use of their reason and sense, such that they do not understand what they are doing. In that instance, should a minister give the supper?

Balduin answered with a distinction between the clearly ungodly and the godly. The godly "are those who while they were healthy diligently heard the Word of God, reverently used the holy supper, and conducted their life in a holy fashion as much as they could despite their imperfection."²⁹ For those who could sign, indicate, or agree that they desired to take the Lord's Supper, even though debilitated by disease and their memory weakened, "These must

²⁵ Balduin, *Brevis Institutio*, 235.

²⁶ Cf. Beza, *The Life of John Calvin*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1908), 108–9; idem, *Les Vies de Jean Calvin et de Théodore de Bèze mises en français* (Geneva: Jean Herman Widerhold, 1681), 168–69.

²⁷ Calvin received the Lord's Supper from Beza's own hand: see Beza, *Les Vies*, 144–45, "Le 2. d'Avril qui estoit le jour de Pâques, quoy qu'il fût dans un abbatement extreme, il se fit porter au Temple, il entendit toute la prédication, il receut de ma main la Cène du Seigneur, et quelque foible que fût sa voix, il ne laissa pas de chanter les Pseaumes."

²⁸ Balduin, *Tractatus ... De ... Casibus nimirum Conscientiae* (Wittenberg: Paulus Helwigius, 1628).

²⁹ *Tractatus*, 1087.

be sedulously comforted, and even if they at least indicate their agreement and assent to what is read to them with a nod, must not be denied, for even the external gestures are a mark of interior desire and devotion.”³⁰ But those who do not have use of their external senses or their reason do not hear, understand, demonstrate contrition or faith, and therefore cannot eat or drink properly.³¹ Balduin articulated five basic criteria for participation in the Lord’s Supper. There must be: (1) a remembrance of the Lord’s death, (2) a proving of the communicant, (3) a godly desire for the most holy table, (4) an avoidance of a bare use of the sacrament apart from a good motive, and (5) a nourishment of security in the godly. And finally, he reminds his readers that “it is not the privation of the supper that condemns us, but contempt of it.”

In time of plague, Balduin asks how, in rural areas where a pastor lacks a colleague, ought the holy supper be administered to the sick so that the whole church is not infected with a fear of the pastor?³² The issue was that if a pastor is known to visit the sick and dying, how can the healthy be near him? Pastoral engagement with plague victims would—and did—incite fear of the pastor and invite avoidance in congregants. First, said Balduin, the pastor is to be meticulous regarding his own calling and behavior with the sick lest the people fear infection from him in his public ministry. His personal habits of care (what we would call hygiene) should be meticulous. Second, Balduin rejected the use of assistants who would take communion to the sick after a minister has consecrated it, since to him this had the appearance of papistry. Instead, so that there will be less danger of infection, the pastor should visit the sick person, order him to be moved from his sick room, placed in a sunny place, downwind at distance from the pastor but still close enough that the pastor may hear his confession, and then the pastor should administer the sacrament to him, maintaining distance.³³ Additionally, when infection strikes an area, the pastor should not venture into those areas so that he does not bring exposure from the sick to the whole assembly. In this case the sick should use catechisms, passages of Scripture, and Luther’s *Postilla* “so that they are not entirely devoid of some exercise in the divine word.”³⁴ We see here the importance of accessible

³⁰ *Tractatus*, 1087.

³¹ *Tractatus*, 1087.

³² *Tractatus*, 1098–1100.

³³ *Tractatus*, 1099.

³⁴ *Tractatus*, 1099.

Christian literature as an available means of comfort when a minister was unavailable. Furthermore, “there is not such great need of the sacrament of the supper that due to one or other sick person somewhere the whole assembly is brought into the risk of infection.”³⁵ Thus, Balduin views communion as helpful, but not requisite. And while all should attend the holy supper if they are well and there is no risk, if there is a risk of infecting others,

... those who labor with a dangerous disease should spare their brethren and at this point the sick should acknowledge this is a case of necessity, where even without the use of this sacrament they can die blessedly. ... therefore, whoever can have the holy supper without risk to others, should not neglect it. However, those who are in an extreme case of necessity (to which we also refer that time when it cannot be used without detriment to one’s neighbor) should be deprived of it. Therefore, they should not despair because it is not privation of the sacrament, but contempt of it, that condemns.³⁶

The issue of a case of necessity is whether a person is stubbornly or willfully neglecting the holy supper, or only withdrawing due to sickness. Attendance at church services and participation by members was obligatory and one could not be absent for light reason. Thus, due to the extraordinary circumstance of deadly infection, the sick need not worry that they are in a contumacious and rebellious state. But if someone is not sick and avoiding the public assembly, that is not a case of necessity but some form of contumacy. Balduin applied this last comment repeatedly, *non est privatio sacramenti, sed contemptus eius condemnatur* (it is not privation of the sacrament, but contempt of it, that condemns) throughout his work when dealing with either the infectious sick or the impenitent.

Reformed Approaches to Comfort, Pastoral Calling, and the Plague

The Reformed pastor and theologian, Theodore Beza (1519–1605), endorsed the administration of communion privately to the sick with qualification. As Balduin noted, Beza does reference the custom of the ancient church when deacons brought the Eucharist to the sick who were absent from the

³⁵ *Tractatus*, 1099.

³⁶ *Tractatus*, 1100.

public assembly. “Therefore no custom of anyone, no matter how ancient, moves me at all because this issue must be judged by its reasons and not by examples.”³⁷ It is scriptural principle not historical example that should have primacy. So what were Beza’s reasons for his moderated view? In Beza’s *Quaestiones et Responsiones*, question 241, he had asked, “Do you think the Lord’s Supper ought to be celebrated elsewhere than in the common and public assembly?”³⁸ Since, in Beza’s opinion a person prohibited by disease from being bodily present should be considered as equally present, “I do not doubt at all that this thing would bring great comfort to the sick; I wish greatly that this custom was restored, but whether it should be brought to the sick to be celebrated at a time when the Lord’s Supper is not being administered in the Church, I am exceedingly undecided about that.”³⁹ Beza’s indecision is due in part to the recognition that other Reformed communities, pastors, and theologians in the period differed widely as to whether the Lord’s Supper could be celebrated outside of the public ministry of the Word in the regular worship meeting. There was perhaps, however, not as much distance among the Reformed as Balduin had claimed.

In question 240 Beza had evaluated whether the Lord’s Supper could be celebrated in private houses. “I have nothing to say against private houses, if the Church, that is the common assembly should meet in them, just as this was also needed under the tyranny of the Roman Empire in ancient times, and just as it is still necessary in many places in our times.”⁴⁰ The key issue on which Beza insisted is that these assemblies should not lack the preaching of the Word and administration of the Sacrament.⁴¹ In a further question along these lines, on whether private nocturnal meetings were forbidden, Beza had answered that the Church might need to meet in private homes at night due to persecution, as in the case of the French Reformed churches “who have born the weight of the most horrible persecutions for over fifty years now.”⁴² The issue then is not the location of the building (a public building or a private residence),

³⁷ Beza, *Tractationes Theologicae*, 3:364, “Nihil igitur me mouet quorundam consuetudo, quantumvis vetus, quia rationibus non exemplis iudicandum est.”

³⁸ Beza, *Tractationes Theologicae*, 3:363; cf. cited in Balduin, *Tractatus*, 235.

³⁹ Beza, *Tractationes*, 3:363.

⁴⁰ *Tractationes*, 3:363.

⁴¹ *Tractationes*, 3:363.

⁴² *Tractationes*, 3:363.

nor the time of its assembly, but whether the congregation is regularly assembling for the ministry of the Word and Sacrament.

In a follow up point on question 241, Beza asked whether the Lord's Supper ought to be celebrated outside of the public and common assembly of the Church. Here Beza articulated his primary objection, "First, since the Lord's Supper is not some family's private action, but purely an ecclesiastical one, and thus Passover was eaten in Israel by the household, even so it still was eaten at no other time than when the whole of Israel celebrated the mystery."⁴³ Beza contrasted the change in administration from the Passover meal in the household to the public celebration of the Lord's Supper, and then posed a hypothetical question. Even if the whole Christian world celebrated the Lord's Supper daily if possible, but at least on certain established days, "I do not know how it is in opposition to the institution of the Lord's Supper, if when the entirety of the rest of the Church proceeded in one way, some house would celebrate those mysteries outside the [regular] order."⁴⁴ Beza asked whether, due to abuses of private communion, the sick must be deprived of this comfort. No, they should not, provided communicants are well instructed; there must not be a magical understanding of the Supper wherein the thing signified is bound to the sign as if by a magical incantation. There must not be any favoritism in the administration of private communion by the pastor, privileging the rich over the poor.

I certainly think that one must take especial care to excise those errors. But I do not think that the sick are to be deprived of either the comfort of the Word or of the Sacraments, if they should be instructed. Even if a season of disease or of dying should prevent them from celebrating the Supper publicly with the rest of the brethren. Such impediments do not allow them to be present in the public assembly, notwithstanding obviously, they should not be deprived in the least from the benefit of the Supper any more than they would have been previously.⁴⁵

With these qualifications Beza concluded, "If anyone thinks that all these obstacles could be avoided and that in an assembly with a sick person asking for it, these mysteries can be celebrated, and at least with these conditions, I

⁴³ *Tractationes*, 3:364.

⁴⁴ *Tractationes*, 3:364.

⁴⁵ *Tractationes*, 3:364.

would not interdict this [i.e., the ancient] custom.”⁴⁶ Like Balduin, Beza put forward the primacy of the public assembly while noting the extraordinary necessity imposed by sickness or dying.

In his *De Peste Quaestiones Duae Explicatae*, after Beza considered the nature of secondary causes and the importance of human agency in utilizing medicine and all licit preventatives of plague, he outlined the nature of Christian vocation with respect to plague.⁴⁷ The occasion for his writing in 1579 was not an abstract consideration of the plague and God’s sovereignty but aimed at giving pastoral counsel and instruction to Christians struggling with their various callings and vocations in a time of plague in Geneva and its environs. May someone flee the plague? Beza answered,

Let those who intend to withdraw know that no one has such a great reason, either for oneself or for their family, that one may forget what one owes their country, their fellow citizens, and lastly to others to whom they are bound by the common bond of humanity and society, or by any other kind of necessity. For love does not seek its own.⁴⁸

The issue is not whether you should love your neighbor, but how you should love your neighbor in your calling if you must avoid infection. One must distinguish between public callings, like magistrates and ministers, and private ones, like the common laity. Beza pleaded that “everyone must have regard to their station and calling; for some serve in public offices, either civil or ecclesiastical; the rest are private persons.”⁴⁹

His exhortation would apply not only to a Christian’s public duties, but also their private ones as well. Husbands are not free to abandon wives, and vice versa; nor parents their children, children their parents, nor citizens their fellow citizens. If this admonition to faithfulness is true of Christians in their various private callings, it was especially true for ministers of the Gospel in their public one. “I do not see how,” said Beza, “any who serve in a public civil office may flee their charge in the time of plague; and for faithful pastors to

⁴⁶ *Tractationes*, 3:364.

⁴⁷ Theodore Beza, *De Peste Quaestiones Duae Explicatae* (Geneva: Eustache Vignon, 1579); idem, *A Shorte Learned and Pithie Treatise of the Plague*, trans. John Stockwood (London: Thomas Dawson, 1580); idem, *FTP*, 3–31.

⁴⁸ *FTP*, 29.

⁴⁹ *FTP*, 27.

forsake but one poor sheep at the time when he most of all needs heavenly comfort, it is too shameful, indeed too wicked to even consider.”⁵⁰ On the other hand, the commandment not to murder applies as much to others as oneself, “therefore ... neither their own, nor the lives of any belonging to or depending on them, are to be thoughtlessly put in danger of deadly infection.”⁵¹ The goal and role of diligent love in one’s several relations and callings are the primary consideration in times of plague. And with respect to conscience, “no one should either withdraw or remain who has a doubting conscience about it. But rather, when someone has learned out of the Word of God what his duty is, he ought to commend himself to God and persevere with constancy in it.”⁵²

In agreement with Balduin, then, Beza noted that the sick also have obligations to the healthy, namely to be careful that “they do not abuse the love of their kindred and friends at a time when they desire to have themselves provided for.”⁵³ He was concerned that the sick should not spread infection, either publicly or privately. Here Beza resorted to his own experience of having plague when his friends, John Calvin and Pierre Viret, wanted to visit him, “But I did not permit anyone to come to me, lest, by the great loss of such great men, I would have been thought to have provided for myself through loss to the Christian commonwealth.”⁵⁴ Part of love of others, said Beza, is to keep them from harm if you can, especially if one is infected with an infectious deadly disease. Beza insisted that an individual’s needs cannot unduly jeopardize the lives of those essential for the well-being and continuity of the Church and Commonwealth.

Wolfgang Musculus (1497–1563), a pastor in Augsburg and a Reformed professor in Bern also provides a helpful window into varied practices of the administration of the Lord’s Supper. Musculus authored commentaries on Genesis, the Psalms, Isaiah, the Gospels of Matthew and John, and most of the Pauline corpus. He was respected as a scholar, colleague, and godly friend by such reformers as Martin Bucer (Strasbourg), Heinrich Bullinger (Zürich), and

⁵⁰ *FTP*, 28.

⁵¹ *FTP*, 27.

⁵² *FTP*, 26.

⁵³ *FTP*, 28.

⁵⁴ *FTP*, 29.

John Calvin (Geneva). After his death, what is known as his *Loci Communes* was compiled from his exegetical commentaries into a theological handbook and published in 1560. By 1577 his *Loci* had also been translated into French.

As has been noted, there were a range of opinions on the necessity of final communion. Commenting on Roman Catholic beliefs and practice in the mid-sixteenth century, Musculus noted that one immediate consequence of not receiving a final communion included disqualification from burial in a Christian cemetery, but more importantly they “think that those departing this life without their last communion do not gain entry into heaven.” But even if Roman Catholics did receive final communion, “yet,” he says,

they are not prepared in such a way so as to go straight to heaven, at least not before they first go into the papal fire for a full purification, and not without the sacrifices of the Mass on the first, seventh, and thirtieth of the month, and on the anniversary of their death, as they say, at last they depart to that heaven which the papal indulgences bring them, being expiated and redeemed.⁵⁵

Musculus also observed that some “evangelical churches” (*ecclesia evangelica*), that is, Lutheran churches, retain a private and last communion not for the sake of purgatory, but “so that through the body and blood of the Lord they are made stronger in their faith, and more equipped to resist the temptations of Satan and to sustain the pains of death.” He does not disagree with the goal of such activity, but on the wisdom of this practice.

Contrary to these evangelical churches, Musculus argues for the particular importance of communion as part of the public worship and only received in the public assembly of the Church. His concerns can be reduced to three: 1) scriptural faithfulness, 2) ecclesiastical attendance, and 3) doctrinal prudence. “The rest of the churches abstain from this private and household communion of the sick for these reasons. The first is because the Lord wanted this communion to be ecclesiastic and public, just as is seen in the apostolic tradition in 1 Corinthians 11.”⁵⁶ Musculus consistently emphasized the public nature of communion as necessary for full participation in the Church and its fellowship. In describing who must be admitted to the table, he stated that “the administration of the Supper is not a private rite that pertains to a select few, but to

⁵⁵ Musculus, *Loci Communes* (1599), 370.

⁵⁶ Musculus, *Loci Communes* (1599), 370.

the public, entire, and common Church, so that however many are counted among the members of the Church must be admitted.”⁵⁷ There is also an interesting pivot on the term tradition. While others might speak of ancient custom or patristic tradition, Musculus reduced the question to apostolic tradition, that is, in his usage, to a matter of written Scripture in 1 Corinthians 11. And so, while there might be matters of prudence that could be informed by considerations of past practice, of ultimate concern for Musculus is that ancient custom should not surmount clear scriptural teaching. This is similar to Beza’s point that it is *rationes*, reasons, not *consuetudines*, customs, that are determinative of right practice.

Musculus continues the discussion of his concerns:

Second, so that in hope of gaining a private and last communion they would not desert the public and ecclesiastic one, and it would happen that those communions would be held more infrequently than it is fitting for the church that has been properly instructed. Third, so that an opportunity would not be opened by private and household suppers for the opinion of *operis operatum*, and of a false confidence (*praepostera fiducia*), whereby like papists with their private Masses, so more carnal evangelicals would depend upon sacramental signs so received in place of a farewell [communion]. And these seem to be sufficiently grave and pregnant reasons why the sick should be visited by ministers of the Word and pastors with a sedulous diligence, and invigorated and strengthened with the comfort of the Word of Christ. Next, ecclesiastic communion should be held quite frequently.⁵⁸

Private communion, according to Musculus, tended towards individuals forsaking the assembly of God’s people. A third warning to believers was directed against a *praepostera fiducia*, a false confidence derived from a ritual as opposed to a true confidence in Christ. The solution in Musculus’ view is a vigorous policy of pastoral visitation to comfort the sick through a close ministry of the Word to them. And, while the Lord’s Supper was only to be celebrated publicly in the regular public assembly of the Church, it should be administered frequently and regularly that occasional absence due to sickness might be

⁵⁷ Musculus, *Loci Communes* (1599), 369.

⁵⁸ Musculus, *Loci Communes* (1599), 369.

mitigated. Otherwise, it seems, if communion were offered more infrequently, a regular source of comfort would be limited.

Findings

With respect to these samples from early modern Lutheran and Reformed theologians, there are multiple aspects of consideration when dealing with the sick. Balduin identified the pastoral task as taken up with preaching and comfort, in emulation of the work of the Holy Spirit. Beza and Musculus would largely agree. With respect to the Lord's Supper, all of these figures would agree that repentance and faith are necessary elements in deriving full benefit from participation in it. These pastors would agree that no one should willfully absent themselves from the table. However, someone suffering a deadly sickness or other infectious diseases are sufficient reason to absent oneself from the public assemblies of the Church. For Beza, withdrawing from plague is legitimate if it is in keeping with a person's calling and vocation. However, pastors, magistrates, and others have a duty of care towards the sick. Balduin sharpens this argument recommending how pastors should exercise all lawful means to stay well as they visit the sick. Balduin, Beza, and Musculus would all agree that recklessness and timidity are unbefitting of a Christian. But in the exercise of communion and its usage with the sick and suffering not all of the Protestants agreed; Lutherans in general affording communion to the sick, but the Reformed with a high degree of reticence, if at all.

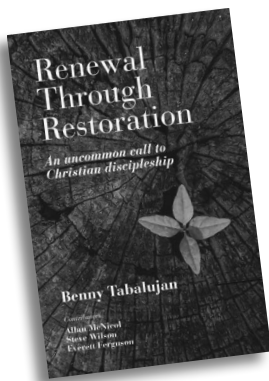
Where these reflections may be most helpful is the consideration of the importance of healthy participation in the local church. All of these pastors agreed that the public assembly of the Church under the Word and Sacrament cannot be lightly avoided. Beza and Musculus are more cautious in the bringing of communion to the sick. Beza, like Balduin, would hold to a moderate position that the ancient custom of the patristics could be used not because of its antiquity, but because of scriptural reasons. All of these theologians agree that it may not be possible or wise to visit the sick at all times. Balduin makes a point that it is important to have Christian literature for the comfort of the sick. Musculus, while denying that the sick should receive communion at home, still maintains that it is the ministry of comfort and the promises of God that should encourage the sick most, and this should be applied frequently. It is hard to imagine Balduin and Beza disagreeing that the ministry of the Word

should have priority in comfort. The debate then was whether Word and Sacrament could be administered privately and separately from the congregation. The ministry of the Word was both public and private; the debate was whether the Lord's Supper was.

With respect to the pastoral ministry and plague, perhaps the most interesting reminder is the integrity and importance of the public ministry of the Word. The public worship of God and fellowship of God's people should not be forsaken. Instead, each should take due consideration of their various callings, their circumstances, and commit themselves to live faithfully in communion with God and his people.

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In the Habit of Sloth

M. Todd Hall

Center for Christian Studies

In 1978, Stephen King, known primarily for his horror books, published the novel *The Stand*. The book was reprinted in 1990 as a *Complete and Uncut Edition*, restoring over 400 pages which had been cut from the original printing, bringing it to over 1,100 pages. The massive work is an epic tale of good versus evil set in a post-apocalyptic America that has been ravaged by the “Super flu.” Indeed, much of the first third to half of the book is made up of the spread of this deadly virus—a virus created in a military lab which escaped when a security guard broke quarantine. The manipulated flu virus is incredibly contagious and virulent, spreading quickly and easily throughout the population and wiping out something like 99.4 percent of humanity. Following this, the book turns into a struggle between two communities: one of darkness, and one of light.

One of the most interesting and disturbing moments in the book comes when the “good” survivors, now gathered in Boulder, turn the power back on and have to then engage in “clean up,” that is, the task of removing and burying all the bodies left in the wake of the pandemic. In the 1994 miniseries adaptation of the book, the grisly moment is well portrayed. The leader of the clean-up crew begins his task at a church. He attempts to fortify his workers by telling them to think of the bodies as stacks of wood, and he explains that they’re starting with the churches in town because, historically, people in deadly epidemics tended to gather in places of worship. When they open the doors of the church, they find it full of bodies.

Of course, such would not have been the case had 2020’s coronavirus pandemic had a 99.4 percent mortality rate. The churches would have been found

emptied and locked, and the historical precedent of humans receiving their last solace in a place of worship would have been broken. Regardless of one's point of view on the closure of churches at the height of COVID, the pandemic has in some ways proven to be a true apocalypse—a true revelation of the faithfulness (or lack thereof) of many Christians who previously attended church out of a habit that was easily broken.¹ There can be little doubt that there will be lasting effects on the spiritual transformation of many Christians.

In this article I will analyze ways in which the pandemic has affected discipleship in many churches—specifically how it has affected spiritual formation.² I will begin with offering a more detailed definition of “spiritual formation” in a Christian context. I will then offer a discussion of three aspects of human life that must be transformed for a person to experience lasting personal change, namely Ideas, Roots, and Social Integration. Each of these aspects has been challenged by the pandemic, but perhaps especially the latter two. Finally, I will offer a few suggestions for engaging congregations in each of these aspects of lasting personal change.

Spiritual Formation: A Definition

Spiritual formation is an often used and misunderstood concept in much of popular American Christianity. It is often viewed as a search for personal fulfillment with only internal implications—developing the spiritual life, drawing nearer to God, practicing self-care or self-fulfillment and the like. Classically, however, spiritual formation in Christianity has meant to form the internal heart of a person into the character of Christ, and thus has major external implications. Spiritual disciplines—habits meant to draw Christians into the life of God, such as regular prayer, meditation, *lectio divina*, and the like—were

¹ I do not intend this to be a negative reflection. I will argue below that our habits are vital to our moral and spiritual development, and thus, church attendance out of habit is extremely important. I brush my teeth primarily from habit, but this does not suggest that brushing my teeth is any less efficacious for doing so.

² The phrase “spiritual formation” has many different connotations in today's world. I use the phrase to describe the entire process of discipleship: developing and maintaining a spiritual life toward entering into a deeper relationship with God, and in doing so being transformed more fully into his image and likeness, thus developing lasting personal change.

meant, from the beginning, to produce fruit in believers. This fruit is nothing less than the incarnation of the gospel in their lives. As Paulo Freire argues,

[The incarnate Word] could never be learned if, at the same time, its meaning were not also grasped, and its meaning could not be grasped if it were not, also, incarnate in us. This is the basic invitation that Christ made, and continues to make to us, that we come to know the truth of this message through practicing it, down to the most minute detail....

I cannot know the Gospels if I take them simply as words that come to rest in me or if, seeing myself as empty, I try to fill myself with these words. This would be the way to bureaucratize the Word, to empty it, to deny it, to rob it of its eternal *coming to be* in order to turn it into a formal rite. On the contrary, I understand the Gospels, well or badly, to the degree that, well or badly, I live them.³

Dallas Willard has defined spiritual formation as “a Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self—our ‘spiritual’ side—in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself.” To this he adds, “In the degree to which such a spiritual transformation to inner Christlikeness is successful, the outer life of the individual will become a natural expression or outflow of the character and teachings of Jesus. We will simply ‘walk the walk,’ as we say.”⁴ Thus spiritual formation may be defined as a series of habits and practices that, with the help of the Holy Spirit, draw Christians closer to knowing the heart of the gospel through practicing it. These habits and practices of course include the habits of spirituality noted above, but also must include an element of service and communal involvement.

It is important, here, to note that spiritual formation in the Christian tradition is intended to draw Christians, through experience of the disciplines, more deeply into knowledge of Christ, moving from intentionality to fulfillment through the process of intuition. The disciplines are meant to provide more than simple spiritual fulfillment, they are meant to experientially draw Christians into the knowledge of Christ. Ultimately, spiritual formation is the

³ Paulo Freire, “Know, practice, and teach the Gospels,” *Religious Education* 79/4 (1984): 547–48.

⁴ Dallas Willard, *Living a Transformed Life Adequate to Our Calling*. Unpublished paper presented at the Augustine Group (2005).

decentering of the self and the placing of Jesus Christ and his gospel at the heart of the believer's life. Only a life formed in such a way can live faithfully to the gospel in a world in which the self demands to be the center of all things. The problem of the centering of the human self is perhaps more acute in our society than in any in history, and, I believe, more acute following the first several months of 2020 than in any time in our history. The church must engage in personal transformation, in spiritual formation, if she is to remain salt and light in the world today.

Three Aspects of Lasting Personal Change

How, though, do Christians develop spiritual formation—personal transformation—in such a way that will last? As briefly introduced above, lasting personal change requires transformation in three main areas: 1) Ideas (in basic comprehension and thinking); 2) Roots (habits, daily rhythms, personal practices); and 3) Social integration (a renegotiation of identity within a social context). Insofar as a person experiences transformation in each of these areas he is likely to maintain the transformation and continue working toward the trajectory of transformation established; conversely, to the extent in which these areas are not influenced toward transformation, spiritual formation itself is transitory and short lived.⁵

Transformation in each of these areas is facilitated in different ways. Transformation of ideas can occur, often, through epistemologically challenging events and ideas, through differing interpretive (hermeneutical) frameworks, and through critical reflection on data and events. A person who bumps into an idea or experience that challenges familiar knowledge taken for granted, the result is confusion and cognitive dissonance. This experience has been called in educational theory an *epistemological shudder*.⁶ These events are chaotic and may serve as moments which provide a different perspective on data and experiences. Therefore, they often lead to a transformation in thought, and thus a breaking apart and radical adjustment of what Berger and

⁵ The development of this framework was done by my friend and former colleague at Austin Graduate School of Theology, Daniel Napier. It can be found in his forthcoming book, *The Philosophy of Jesus: The Nazarene's Way Among the Ancient Schools*.

⁶ M. Lozinsky and I. Collinson, *Epistemological Shudder: The X-Files, Myths, and Mimetic Capital*. Paper presented at the University of New South Wales Post Graduate Conference School of English and Modern Languages (June 1999).

Luckmann refer to as the world taken for granted.⁷ This is a key moment of transformation toward the kind of knowledge of the gospel for which Freire calls, and thus toward true spiritual formation.

Second, transformation of roots, i.e., habits and practices, is vital to lasting spiritual (trans)formation. Habits and practices both form and are formed by our desires, and therefore are central to human identity as desiring animals. Habits are usually transformed through the somewhat mechanical process of repetition: humans who desire a change of habits must focus for some time on changing their daily routines in order to incorporate some new habit. James K. A. Smith has argued that liturgy provides a substructure to habits and practices, that the practices of liturgy—whether the liturgy of the church or the liturgy of the consumerist mall—inform our self-understanding and our vision of the “good life.”⁸ In order to adjust habits and practices, then, it is necessary to start new ones. This is not new insight, of course, as, for instance, Aristotle argued that diligent practice of habits develop within a person a character toward *eudaemonia*, or “fulfillment.”⁹ Thus for a person to achieve lasting spiritual formation they must experience a transformation of habits and practices.

Finally, in order for a person to attain lasting spiritual formation, he must engage in a process of socially integrating his new person. This is a difficult task insofar as human community is often held together through common commitments. A person who has radically spiritually changed—for example, a person who has recognized that the call of the gospel demands change in their attitudes toward issues of sexuality—will often find great resistance in their current social group. This will call for a re-negotiation of social identity both with their peer group as well as with groups outside of their peer group. Often this means a severing of ties with a previous group, which can have devastating consequences for the spiritually transformed person. Though this may

⁷ Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Penguin, 1966), cf. 19–46.

⁸ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2009).

⁹ Aristotle, *Nichomachean ethics*, 2nd ed., trans. H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1934).

be the most difficult area of change, it is also perhaps the most vital, as human community and support are so important for developing spiritually.¹⁰

Change in the Wrong Direction: The Pandemic's Effect on Spiritual Formation

No one could have known in January of 2020 what was descending upon the United States. Those of us who live in the middle of the country can, most likely, vividly remember the march of the coronavirus from the major coastal cities and travel hubs to our own places of residence. It was eerie and frightening, and as the lockdowns began there was something of an apocalyptic feel to the times. It was a Thursday when the small congregation to which I minister found that we would be closing our doors and transitioning to a live-streamed service the following Sunday. We scrambled (a church of technophobes) but were able to broadcast on that first Sunday, and for many more thereafter. It was comforting, those first several weeks, to gather with our church family, even if only virtually. In fact, our congregation actually *grew* as people who had not visited our Sunday services began “attending” our live streams.

There were concerns, though, even during those times. Many church leaders found themselves wondering whether the church would recover members who had been attending virtually. Further, how would the needs of discipling and pastoral care—not to mention the day-to-day needs of ministry—be met? What would the church look like once the pandemic passed?

Few of us could have imagined, then, the extent of the lockdowns and the rebuilding effort needed. We assumed that the pandemic would, in fact, end. More and more that assumption seems mistaken. As the pandemic carries on, and as vaccines prove to be less effective than hoped (by the public at least), church leaders face a difficult challenge in inspiring a demoralized and increasingly indifferent church body.

The pandemic—and its attendant social consequences—has affected each area of human life in which change is required for lasting transformation. First, in terms of Ideas, American society is increasingly experiencing an epistemological shudder regarding the very order on which the nation has been

¹⁰ See John McKnight, *The Careless Society: Community and Its Counterfeits* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), for an extensive and excellent account of the loss of community and its consequences.

founded. This can be most clearly seen in the violent riots and the rapid rise of the narrative of “systemic racism” following the death of George Floyd at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer, as well as the events surrounding the 2020 election, culminating in the horrifying storming of the U.S. Capitol. Trust in the American order has been deeply shaken, and this loss of trust has bled over into other institutions, including the church.

Along with Ideas, Social Integration has been deeply affected by the isolation from *real* community, and its replacement with the toxic environment of (anti-) social media. Several studies have indicated a correlation between higher social media use during the pandemic and a rise in depression and other negative mental health issues, further exacerbating the link between social media use and depression apart from the pandemic.¹¹ The loss of a community within which one may form and maintain a transformed identity has no doubt had tremendous effect on spiritual formation.

Whereas each of these areas is worthy of an exploration in and of itself, it is the aspect of Roots, of habits and practices, that I believe has been most affected by the pandemic. The pandemic lockdowns and the ongoing nature of the pandemic itself has led to radical disruptions of the daily lives of practically everyone on the planet, including the *habits* of daily life—for example, rising early to shower and go to work, regular activities with friends after work, and, most notably for this essay, attending the gathering of the church.

Initially, our concern about the loss of habits may be minimal: there is a tendency in our culture to see “habit” as largely meaningless to true

¹¹ See, for example, Julia Brailovskaia, Inga Truskauskaitė-Kuneviciene, et. al., “Coronavirus (COVID-19) Outbreak: Addictive Social Media Use, Depression, Anxiety and Stress in Quarantine – an Exploratory Study in Germany and Lithuania,” *Journal of Affective Disorders Reports* vol. 5 (July 2021): 1–6, which suggests that “the enhanced use of [Social Media] could contribute to negative consequences. It could foster addictive tendencies and the increase of depression, anxiety and stress symptoms. Experimental research that was conducted previously to the COVID-19 outbreak described a longitudinal significant increase of well-being in individuals who were advised to reduce their daily [Social Media Use] for the duration of two weeks...” (p. 5). Hundreds of studies have been and are being conducted on this phenomenon. For a link between social media use and depression, see Roy H. Perlis, Jon Green, et al., “Association Between Social Media Use and Self-reported Symptoms of Depression in US Adults,” *JAMA Network Open* 4/11 (Nov. 2021). doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2021.36113.

dedication—so, for example, the loss of the habit of church attendance is not a *bad* thing, insofar as one should attend church intentionally and mindfully, and anything other than that is disingenuous, or, worse, hypocritical. This greatly underestimates the function of habit in human life and the dangers of the loss of *good* habits for human (and Christian) flourishing.

Human beings are creatures of habit. Cognitive psychologists have been suggesting for some time that much (perhaps most) of human life is actually defined by “automaticity,” by the movement of conscious choice to unconscious action.¹² Consider learning how to drive: initially, even the simplest parts of driving must be consciously considered—“this is a key, it goes here... turn it till the car begins to start,” and so on. Through the practice of driving, however, all of these processes are off-loaded to the subconscious mind, so much so that one may drive *without ever thinking about driving*. Drawing on this research, Smith argues that

Whether we intentionally choose to participate in a practice or unintentionally just find ourselves immersed in it over time, the result is the same: the dispositions become inscribed into our unconscious so that we ‘automatically’ respond the way we’ve been conditioned.... Since research indicates that only about 5 percent of our daily activity is the product of conscious, intentional actions that we ‘choose,’ one can see that there’s a lot at stake in the formation of our automatic unconscious.¹³

In short, our habits are central to our character—we most often *react* in situations from the unconscious life which has been formed, one way or another, by regular practices in which we engage. In this way, the pandemic has been particularly challenging insofar as it disrupted the habitual discipline of church attendance (as well as many other disciplines)—a habit which, at minimum, instills the character of duty in a human.

It is important to recognize, too, that habits are not simply lost but are rather *replaced* by other habits. As churches closed their doors during the pandemic, and as the pandemic continues to rage, many Christians not only fell out of the habit of attending the gathered worship of the church, they also—

¹² Cf. John A. Bargh and Tanya L. Chartrand, “The Unbearable Automaticity of Being,” *American Psychologist* 54/7 (July 1999): 462–79.

¹³ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 81.

unintentionally—fell *into* the habit of sloth. Many of those who no longer attend in-person worship began by joining the church “live” on streaming video, and many of those did so casually, sleeping later than they would have on a normal Sunday, not getting themselves ready to attend, and then joining the service for “pajama church.” It is a small step from this to “I’ll watch it later,” and a smaller step from this to a loss of any commitment to the gathered people of God altogether.

All of this is, of course, devastating to spiritual formation—to the decentering of the self and the movement toward becoming more Christlike. Central to that movement is the formation of the inner-self, the “unconscious,” into that which responds to various situations, *habitually*, as Jesus would, through the regular “thick” practices of Christian worship.¹⁴ At the heart of a person formed by the practices of the pandemic church mentioned above is an inability to choose, habitually, the disciplined life—the narrow way—of Jesus. How do we recover from such developments?

Recovering the Habits of Discipline

How do we help our congregations recover the disciplined Christian life? Many church leaders are of course reflecting on this question. It’s important to note, here, that the pandemic did not *cause* this loss of discipline, it merely exacerbated and accelerated it. Church attendance has been dipping for many years, and Christian formation has been in decline even among those who continued to attend. In this way the pandemic has been “apocalyptic” in the sense of revealing what was already there. The problem, then, is not one that can be solved simply by turning off the livestream. How, then, can we address it? There are many possible solutions to explore, but I will offer a few.

First, the church needs to reclaim the vision of the beautiful life on offer in Jesus, and our corporate worship should be an expression of this vision. A worship grounded in the story of God and in our place within that story helps to form what Charles Taylor has referred to as our “social imaginary”—our unconscious view of our place in society and our interaction with it.¹⁵ We tend to think of morality and character as being formed through deliberative

¹⁴ See Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 82.

¹⁵ Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), see chapter 2.

processes, through engaging with various rational propositions. In truth, though, it is the deeper, unconscious understanding of the world and our place in it that most influences our actions and ethics. And this world is carried not so much in rational propositions as it is in “images, stories, and legends.”¹⁶ As Smith explains, Christian worship, then, should intentionally be built around equipping Christians to enter into the society of the church, to share a common vision with that society, and to orient the desires of the Christian toward the vision of reality on offer therein. In other words, the story of the gospel and the life that it offers should be central to every act of Christian worship.

Second, the church needs to invite Christians into that beautiful life as actors with agency. This will have several implications, perhaps most importantly an understanding of the Christian in worship as a participant rather than a consumer—the opposite implication of live streamed worship, which by its very nature invites passivity. If there are those who continue to attend our corporate worship solely online, then it is vital that they do so as active participants as far as possible. We should encourage them to engage in all of the rituals *within* worship: standing for readings, singing along with the congregation rather than simply listening to the recorded or live singing, and liturgical responses. We should also encourage them to engage in all of the typical rituals that precede the corporate gathering—rising early, grooming, dressing for worship, and the like—so that they may maintain the habits associated with gathering with God’s people.

Finally, we must stress to people the importance of habit forming. We are creatures of habit, and habit is and will be a part of our lives regardless of whether we choose to make them so or not. We will be in the habit of discipleship, or we will be in the habit of sloth. Walking the way with Jesus is not a passive habit—it does not develop naturally to fill the void as the habit of sloth does. It requires a commitment to regular practice until it becomes so written on the heart as to be second nature. It requires effort, but it promises great reward.

¹⁶ Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 23.

Pastoral Care in the Pandemic

As a supplement to the long-form articles in this issue, we also wanted to hear a variety of responses from a number of ministers who led churches and other ministers through this uncharted territory of COVID and the resulting restrictions and lockdowns. Six ministers responded to our questions—David Duncan, Bradley Helgersen, Brian Lee, Jim Martin, Juan Sanchez, and Allan Stanglin—and their responses to each question are presented in alphabetical order. Their various perspectives are illuminating for all of us who have been through these times of trial. Their responses understandably reflect pain and confusion, conviction and contemplation, but also faithfulness, good news, wisdom, and hope for renewal and unity.

-Editor

JCS: What were the greatest challenges for your congregation to navigate during COVID lockdowns?

Brian Lee

The single greatest challenge was lack of visitors and growth. We are a small church located in the heart of Washington, DC, a very transitional city. A large proportion of our members are spending a few years here for military, government, or graduate school, so membership departures are built into the DNA of our church community. We therefore need a constant flow of new visitors and members just to keep up. During COVID lockdowns, fewer people were moving to town, and almost no one was visiting or seeking to join new churches. We saw few visitors and no growth as a result of streaming services, though I know that experience was different for some other churches. A few years of little growth for a church of 70 in a transitional place had a big impact on our membership.

A second challenge was keeping up with the chaotic, unpredictable, and frankly irrational lockdown policies. Whether you think lockdowns were a

necessary evil or a hysterical folly, they were exceedingly difficult to interpret and keep up with. Produced by bureaucrats, issued by executive fiat, color-coded, phased, constantly shifting, it was a full-time job keeping up with the diktats, reading them carefully, and interpreting and adhering to them faithfully. Thankfully, we have an Associate Pastor who handles administrative challenges, and he faithfully waded through all the details. My prayer is that we come up with a more deliberative, representative, and orderly solution should we embrace severe lockdowns again.

Jim Martin

Much of my experience with COVID-19 lockdowns and congregations relates to ministers attempting to help their congregations navigate during this period. My perspective has been impacted from many hours of phone and Zoom conversations with numerous ministers representing congregations during 2020–2021.

Typically, these conversations focused on their experiences as they attempted to serve the church during this very difficult time. These ministers represented churches from a variety of locations throughout the United States. In addition to participating in these conversations, I led three different coaching groups, composed of eight ministers per group. These groups met once a month for five months. Much of the conversations dealt with the resilience of the ministers and their congregations.

These congregations and their leaders were attempting to navigate life as a congregation through COVID-19 but there were additional issues as well. As the pandemic began in March 2020, churches across the country grappled with what to do. Many went to an online-only presence on Sundays. Preachers would either livestream sermons or record sermons earlier in the week for these to be played on Sunday. Some congregations offered Bible classes via Zoom.

This proved to be a very difficult time for so many congregations. Groups of elders went for months only meeting via Zoom which proved to be a very different dynamic than meeting face to face. Some church leaders reported that it was hard for them to have difficult conversations during this time when the elders only met by Zoom and not in person. Many congregations were not prepared technologically for these challenges. Quite often, particularly if the

minister was young, it was assumed the minister could figure out the various technological needs.

Many churches, after four or five months of being locked down, resumed meeting together. A number of congregations found, however, that many of the pre-COVID group of people/members did not return. In fact, several church leaders said that they were trying to figure out who was still with them. Some members went to other congregations. Others continued to watch the assemblies online. Some just had not returned and church leaders had no explanation.

What has further complicated the experience of the pandemic are the cultural/societal events that have taken place during this time. There has been conflict over COVID-19 itself—is this virus/pandemic of real concern or has it been “overblown?” Other conflicts involve the issues of masks/no-masks, vaccine/anti-vaccine. In addition, during the time of this pandemic, there has been a contentious presidential election, the storming of the U.S. Capitol on January 6, as well as more racial injustices, such as the killing of George Floyd.

All of this has greatly affected congregations. Members have left congregations in a dispute with other church members regarding these issues. Unfortunately, ministers have frequently been in the crosshairs of these disputes.

In Churches of Christ, many ministers left their congregations, but some have left full-time ministry for other vocations. While the actual number of ministers to leave is yet to be determined. I don’t know of another time in my lifetime when this many ministers have left full time ministry during such a period of time.

Many ministers across the United States in reflecting upon their ministries in 2020 and 2021, describe themselves as tired, exhausted, discouraged, and angry.

Juan Sanchez

March 15, 2020, was our last in-person service. I was in Cordoba, Argentina, when we received word that COVID-19 had spread to the point that governments were locking down citizens, closing borders and cancelling flights. Immediately, we arranged one of the last return flights to the United States. Our first order of business was to meet as elders to assess what had

happened and answer the question how we shepherd our people during this time of confusion, questions, and fear. That was our greatest challenge: How would we care for people when we were unable to meet face to face or gather on the Lord's Day?

Allan Stanglin

At the church where I ministered for the first year and a half of the pandemic, we experienced what a lot of church leaders encountered in the polarization of our congregation over the wearing of masks and other mitigation techniques. We, like most elders and ministers, found ourselves in a lose-lose situation: some of our members refused to come to church unless we mandated masks and others vowed not to come if we did. We told our church we were making our decisions based on the science and the medical recommendations but, in reality, we were making our calls based on our own gut feelings and the current mood of the church and our community. The longer the pandemic conditions continued, the more our shepherds relied on the culture instead of the science, and the church became a place that mirrored the inconsistencies and fostered the same mistrust as people were suffering in society.

A challenge I wrestled with personally—this is still a challenge for us to navigate faithfully as church leaders—is the dilemma between telling people to stay home for the sake of their health and asking them to worship with their church family in person for the sake of their soul. We made it really convenient for Christians to “attend church” from the privacy of their own homes, so much so that church became the last place some people would go. We worked hard to purchase additional cameras, add more lights and microphones, and pre-record communion thoughts and announcements so the livestreamed version of church rivaled most any other option. We did it so well, a lot of our folks felt no need to leave their homes. I had one older gentleman, a former elder, tell me he and his wife would probably never come back into the building. “We can turn up the volume to exactly the right level,” he told me. “We can rewind the video when we miss something, we can start it from the beginning if we accidentally sleep in—it’s too easy and nice to just do church from the house!”

I began seeing people out at restaurants and grocery stores who had told me they weren’t coming to church because of COVID. My wife and I attended

a Saturday night July 4th dinner and fireworks show with about 20 people from our church. We were all eating at the same tables, sharing the same food, talking loudly and laughing with each other in tight quarters. But at least half of those people told me they would be doing church from home the next morning because of COVID.

Had we turned church into something you could do just as well watching a screen from home as participating in a pew in a sanctuary? It must go much further back, to our teachings and our experiences together in church. Why do our people not view the Sunday morning assembly as uniquely transformative for their lives? Either we haven't communicated it very well or they haven't experienced much transformation in church. Probably both.

JCS: Has your understanding of ecclesiology changed or been enhanced as a result of the lockdowns?

Bradley Helgersen

The lockdowns have enhanced my appreciation for the necessity of corporate worship.

The goal of spiritual formation is not simply to gain a greater understanding of good and evil, but to be shaped by such knowledge. However, several of the means by which the Spirit performs this sanctifying work have been short-circuited by the modern church's haughty dismissal of liturgy.

Put concisely, the Spirit writes the law upon our hearts in two ways, through preaching and practice. Meaning, firstly that our souls are renewed when the good news of God's kingdom is depicted in concrete images (e.g., in myth, story, and metaphor). The power of such pictures is in their capacity to connect the immanent world to the being who transcends it, allowing the enlightened listener not only to gaze upon God's holiness, but to bask in its beauty. And the admiration produced in the divine presence stirs within us a longing to be conformed to its image (2 Cor 3:18). But it is not just through contemplation that one undergoes true conversion, but also through ceremony.

As moderns we often fail to appreciate the potency of liturgy. Our highly-rationalistic reverence scoffs at the power of practice as it looks with disdain upon previous generations who found great utility in feast days, recited prayers, and other symbolically-rich gestures—pious procedures which are not, as our Puritan predecessors believed, the vain schemings of superstitious souls, but rather effectual exercises for turning our hearts toward holy ends. And this is especially true of corporate liturgy where picture and practice are meant to converge.

Each activity we engage in as the *ecclesia* functions as both a reenactment of the partial past and a dress rehearsal for its future fulfillment. Picturing practices which provide an Einstein-Rosen bridge allowing the aspiring traveler to experience a kind of trans-temporal piety. The ritual of baptism, for instance, raptures us to the past and future reality of our resurrection (Rom 6:3–11). Similarly, the Lord's Supper supplies simultaneous nourishment of the last Passover meal and the first feast of the Lamb (Luke 22:15–16; Rev 19:7–10). And when we sing, we do so in harmony with those who departed for Gethsemane, but who will arrive at the crystal sea (Matt 26:30; Rev 4:4–6). Without such transportive rites our worship is often imprisoned in the present, producing a myopic vision which encourages us to cling to the moment, forgetting that there are greater things to fear than death (like not dying well).

Even when we *are* assembled our approach to adoration is often minimalistic, a ceremony comparable to a shotgun wedding where obligation rather than passion animates the participants. Surviving, as we have, on thimbles of grape juice and stale scraps of bread, amusing ourselves with professional praisers, it's no wonder we are convinced that not much is lost by congregating through a computer screen. The only way to stop the spread of this spiritual pandemic, however, is through widespread inoculation (not by Moderna, but by *Pneuma*). A stab of the Spirit that will produce anti-bodies able to protect us from the virus of vain worship. And any further hesitancy to this vaccine will only lead to our doors being shuttered forever.

Brian Lee

I have a renewed and enhanced conviction that the church gathered in public worship is the core and essential expression of the body of Christ on earth, and related to this, that the sacraments are the anchor of this physical

reality. As a Reformed pastor, Word and Sacrament are at the heart of what we confess about worship, and I believe both the preached word and the sacraments require and depend upon physical presence.

As a result, I have come to the conviction that virtual worship is not true worship. It is a crutch, and no sane person continues to use a crutch after their broken leg has healed. The sacraments anchor this physical presence — a congregation can't share one loaf and one cup over the internet — but I believe this is true of the preached word as well. Hearing a sermon over the internet via a screen or a podcast is not the same covenantal experience of sitting under the lively preaching of the word.

This came home to us when we started streaming and were permitted by the city to have nine individuals in our building for the purposes of streaming. Within a few weeks, our church council agreed that if nine members of our small church could gather, we would rather celebrate multiple communion services a Sunday and invite our congregation to attend. We ran two of these services per Sunday, streaming one, and the small number of members who wanted to attend could do so in small groups. This was exceedingly well received by both members and leaders. These worship services were odd, no doubt, but they anchored our congregation in physical presence, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, and the lively preaching of the word.

Juan Sanchez

During that first elders' meeting, we began to write Scripture passages that came to mind that might help us shepherd our church. We then categorized those passages to try to understand how Scripture directed us to care for our congregation. To our great encouragement, we learned that our ecclesiology led us to practice what would be most necessary to care for the flock of God among us during the lockdown. As pastors, our main task is the shepherd the flock of God among us, leading by example (1 Pet 5:1–4). Thankfully, we already had a pastoral care plan in place in which we regularly worked through our church directory, contacting each member regularly. With this pastoral care plan already in place, we arranged to work through our church directory quicker so that we contacted each member in the first 30 days. To do that, the elders met every week instead of our normal twice per month.

Most encouraging, our emphasis on a culture of discipleship and membership responsibility of every member to care for one another proved fruitful. As the elders contacted each member, we repeatedly heard stories of how members were caring for one another. Some of our small groups took it upon themselves to make sure everyone was contacted and cared for. Meanwhile, our diaconal teams were functioning as expected. Our deacon of widows and shut-ins made sure his team was regularly contacting their lists. All in all, we were encouraged by how the church cared for one another.

JCS: What was the greatest success or unexpected blessing for your congregation that came out of COVID?

David Duncan

One of the great blessings we discovered during the pandemic was an online option for Wednesday night class. We have resumed classes at our building but we now have a weekly adult online class, as well. Houston is a huge city and many people work late, have long commutes or are uncomfortable driving at night. More than eighty percent of the people in the online class never, or almost never, attended Wednesday evening classes in person. We have discovered an entirely new audience that wanted Bible study but did not have an avenue for it. People start logging on about twenty minutes before the teaching begins. A community of people has emerged that study together, pray for each other and provides friendship.

Brian Lee

While there are a myriad of approaches and perspectives to navigating issues of church and state, our congregation took submission to the magistrate as taught in Romans 13 as our starting point. This was incredibly useful, for it allowed us to unite over our response to lockdown requirements as a congregation even if we had a diversity of personal views regarding the policies themselves.

For example, some of our church council were strongly in favor of masks, even double masking. Some were more skeptical of their value or usefulness.

Yet we maintained unity over the fact that when we gathered in public as a worshipping body, we would submit to the magistrate as a part of our witness to our neighbors. While this didn't remove all tensions or disagreements over our response, it did make it much easier for us to come together, as we recognized that worship on the Lord's Day is not about our individual preferences.

Jim Martin

One unexpected blessing is a heightened awareness of just how dangerous and futile it is for the church to have allegiances above Jesus. The result has been startling and has resulted in churches across the nation losing members. At the same time, some church leaders have seen very clearly what can happen when opinions, politics, nationalism, and other idols come before Jesus.

While some congregations seem to focus on returning to being the congregation they used to be, others are asking, "How are we to live out the mission of God at this point in time?"

Many congregations have recognized that while they desire to meet together in person, they also need to have a viable online presence.

Some congregations had Zoom Bible classes during this time in which Christians across the nation were invited to attend. While these churches desire in-person classes, some do not want to lose this online presence.

Many ministers have re-committed themselves to practices which lead to greater resilience and self-care.

While Christians value meeting together, many have seen that the church can continue to minister to people in its neighborhood and city even without a building.

Some congregations have begun to recommit themselves to the basics of the Christian faith and discipleship.

Many Christians have a new-found sensitivity to those who are shut-in due to illness and age. They have seen what it is like to be at home for a period of time where there might be little, if any, human contact.

Juan Sanchez

Of course, we were concerned about our membership. We didn't know how they would fare, but the Lord was gracious. We cared well for one another. Another concern was finances. We simply didn't know how not gathering would affect giving. Our elders contemplated applying for the Payment Protection Program, but in the end we decided not to. Instead, we appealed to our congregation, and the response was overwhelming and humbling. We began gathering again in early June 2020, and one of the great blessings is the number of young adults and young families that have been drawn to our church. Over the last year and a half, we have retained most of our membership and have had an influx of young people join us. It has been an unexpected blessing.

Allan Stanglin

The most immediate blessing was that we were forced to think outside the box. The situation demanded creativity and allowed a flexibility to experiment with almost anything. We held an Ash Wednesday drive-thru service, we organized prayer parades that blessed our local missions partners, we did online talent shows and hosted livestreamed ten-minute "Word and Prayer" sessions four days a week. I began hosting a weekly podcast that highlighted our local missions partners and favorite "Passages and Prayers" from our elders. Some of the ideas were brand new and some were things we had talked about before but never had the space to try them out. Some of the things we tried failed terribly and others turned into meaningful events that will continue to bless our church for years to come.

With two-thirds of our church family participating from their homes on Sunday mornings and almost all Bible classes and midweek activities canceled for a full year, we were given a wonderful opportunity to reimagine what we were doing as a congregation and why. We had the space to rethink our priorities and the freedom to reprioritize our church programming and events. As shepherds and ministers, we developed criteria for using our time and resources on only those things that synced up with our congregation's vision. We surveyed the church and put together a few focus groups to identify those things that truly transformed our members and brought them closer to God and to one another. We radically changed our Wednesday night

programming, made significant adjustments to our Bible class and small groups structures, and refused to restart any program or event just because we had been doing it for twenty years—it had to match the criteria. We made the decisions to pour our church resources and our volunteer hours into fewer things that yield the most Kingdom and Holy Spirit fruit. We made things simpler and more streamlined to match our church’s twin values of transformation and mission.

JCS: Which biblical passages or principles have taken on more importance for you—or have you seen in a new light—during and after the lockdowns?

David Duncan

One of the key passages that has come to mind numerous times during the pandemic is Hebrews 10:24–25 which reminds the audience not to give up meeting together. As a child, I understood this as a passage to be used to bonk people on the top of the head when they skipped worship service on vacation. Instead of it merely being a tool of reprimand, it has helped me appreciate the importance of meeting regularly with brothers and sisters.

Like many congregations, we were only online for a few months. Twice each Sunday, I would drive to the church building and preach a live sermon to an empty auditorium. The only other people that attended in person were two men doing the streaming. I knew hundreds of people were watching but it was incredibly difficult for me to know the pews were supposed to be filled but for the foreseeable future, they would vacant. At some point on the way home after each service, I broke down. I was spiritually feeding people huddled inside their homes, but I was missing community.

The words of the Hebrews writer stayed at the forefront of my mind throughout the pandemic. We do not meet for the purpose of checking a box or avoiding a direct lightning strike, the passage states that we meet to encourage each other and spur one another on to do good deeds. I get it!

It appears we have lost some members that have at least temporarily walked away from their faith. During the pandemic they lost community and

now appear to be on the road to losing their faith. Loving them back is our mission.

Brian Lee

Unity in the body of Christ is a precious gift from the Holy Spirit. Satan recognizes it as such, and attacks it mercilessly. COVID has provided an opportunity for division in our bodies politic and ecclesiastic. Church members and leaders should prioritize unity and earnestly strive for it continually.

Ephesians 4 is a wonderful reminder of this. When Paul pivots in this epistle to how a believer shall walk in a manner worthy of his calling, the first priority is walking “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.” In our typically western obsession with doctrine, we tend to focus on doctrinal unity and purity here. But Paul is clearly concerned that spiritual gifts would be used to keep interpersonal peace in the church.

As COVID response has divided families and churches, we must strive for a response in our church bodies that is conducive to keeping the peace. We should avoid burdening consciences beyond the word of God’s explicit command, and we should structure our responses in such a fashion that we can affirm what we hold in common — one Lord, one faith, one baptism.

Juan Sanchez

Initially, James 4:13–17 was on all our minds. Our 2020 theme was Preparing for Growth. In our own wisdom, we assumed we would press on with our plans. Needless to say, it was humbling to realize that in a moment all could be shut down. Our plans were not God’s plans. We had presumed upon the Lord, so we needed to ask for forgiveness. It was a humbling but important lesson. In addition to COVID-19, though, our nation was faced with political and cultural divisions. To address the racial tensions in our country, we chose to preach through Ephesians. It was a great reminder that our union in Christ leads to our union as a church. And as for political divisions, after Ephesians, we preached through Daniel. Daniel reminded us each week that we are more like Israel in Babylon than Israel in the promised land.

Allan Stanglin

The incarnation of our Lord and that same flesh-and-blood nature of his church took a hit during COVID. As a society, we were already well down the path of increasing individuality and isolation. But the pandemic sped us along so that, somehow, church online has become a viable substitute for the physical presence of and in the Body of Christ. Our salvation is not a one-time event. Yes, we are connected to the life, death, and resurrection of our Savior when we are baptized. But our salvation continues—in fits and starts, with ups and downs, slowly but surely, in church. With people. God’s Spirit transforms us in community. Our Lord changes us and shapes us into his image with other people. When we give and receive forgiveness. When we sing each other’s songs. When we bear one another’s burdens. In the hugs and during the meals. No matter what we’ve been told or what we’ve been doing for the past year and a half, you can’t experience communion at a drive-thru or do church over the internet. We must work overtime now, more than ever, to reclaim the sacramental view of the Christian assembly. We are required now to teach and re-teach, to reassert and reaffirm the transformational purpose and effect in regularly meeting together in person. And we must work just as hard to make sure our Sunday assemblies cultivate the kind of life-changing transformative experience our God intends.

JCS: What have you learned from all this that you will carry forward in ministry?

David Duncan

We have been reminded of the importance of in-person meetings as well as have learned the importance of using technology.

First, we have learned we need to see each other in person. Worshipping through our computers sufficed for a season, but there is something powerful about taking the Lord’s Supper in the same room with our Christian family.

The people of our congregation are slowly returning as they feel comfortable. I often do not have to ask if it an individual’s first Sunday back because I see the tears in their eyes. They are home with their people anticipating worshipping their God. Being in the presence of an auditorium with other people

singing and participating with others in worship, touches the emotions in a way possibly never considered before coronavirus impeded our lives.

Technology is good, but it is not the forever answer. A grandparent loves seeing their out-of-town grandchildren on Facetime, but they cannot wait for the day when they can be with them in person. The same is true with the family of God. Some fellowship occurs in online groups, and it is beneficial for people shut in, separated by distance, or during a short-term crisis, but it is not the standard.

As we have returned, we have learned to appreciate time talking together in the foyer, trips for children to the park, in-person Bible studies, and other opportunities for people to be together in the name of Jesus. We have longed for, and finally returned, to speaking primarily to one another like humans rather than through machines.

We have also learned technology can be advantageous. Besides streaming worship services for people that may not be able to attend, we have learned every committee meeting does not need to be in person. Some issues can be settled quickly through online meetings. For years, nearly every committee meeting was packed into Sunday afternoon or Wednesday evening. Now, via Zoom and other sources, meetings can take place any day of the week and include members that are out of town. Young mothers and fathers are able to spend more time with their families and still participate in online meetings because travel time is eliminated. Online resources will be used more than during pre-pandemic life, but they will not be used exclusively as they were during the shutdown.

Bradley Helgersen

I've come to realize that resistance to governmental tyranny is a gospel issue.

For the early witnesses, the resurrection of Jesus was not a mere metaphor representing some paltry set of principles, but a cannon shot which marked the beginning of a cosmic revolution. Indeed, Peter's inaugural address in Acts 2 is a pronouncement of war as he pleads with his kinsmen to defy the tyrant of the age by pledging allegiance to King Jesus (Acts 2:36).

Many modern Evangelicals may wonder why this proto-proclamation of the church age doesn't propound the gospel (i.e., preach salvation by grace through faith), but as Peter demonstrates, the *euangelion* is much grander than the doctrine of justification. In its profoundest sense, the gospel is the good news that our king has been victorious over the principalities and powers of this world (Col 2:15). Indeed, Prince Immanuel's triumphal exodus from the tomb definitively declares the reestablishment of his dominion and marks the beginning of a slave revolt against the Prince of the Power of the Air—the primordial Jacob who not only fooled Adam into forfeiting the tree of life, but his true vocation as ruling-priest (Gen 3; Luke 4:18; Rom 1:4; Eph 4:8; cf. Gen 1:26–31; 27:36; Rev 1:6). A mantle regained, however, when man rises with Christ from his burial in baptism, and is exalted and “seated with him in the heavenly places” (Rom 6; Eph 2:6; Col 2:12–15).

The gospel, in shorthand, then is “Jesus is Lord!” This declaration means that when a government transgresses its sphere of authority, when it begins to dictate how (and even if) the church can worship, it is a usurpation not unlike that which occurred in the beginning: A satanic attempt to steal sovereignty from God by returning man to a state of sinful servitude, which makes resistance to such tyranny not only the Christian's right, but his duty (Acts 5:29). A failure to do so would be a denial of the gospel and a return to the abdication of responsibility that defined the original sin.

Brian Lee

Christian worship is counter-cultural, and developing a community habituated to worship requires going against the grain in our anti-Christian age. The world is full of competing liturgies, and a lockdown that physically impedes the gathering of God's people acts like an acid upon the worshipping community. Streaming, virtual alternatives are a stopgap finger in the dyke. I worry that those who have embraced the apparent upsides of such technologies will pay a steep price in the years to come.

Jim Martin

I have learned much, both personally, and in terms of ministry. I have been reminded that ministry can be hard—very hard. Reliance on the one who can carry me through hard times is critical. Competence is important.

Yet, there is nothing that replaces our need for absolute dependence upon the Lord for strength, stamina, and resilience. The dynamic of the Spirit at work in ministers and other believers is critical.

I have learned that there is no substitute for the church's primary allegiance to Jesus. Unity within a congregation can only be experienced when allegiance to Jesus matters more than opinions, political persuasions, etc. Far too often this is simply assumed by preachers and other church leaders. The way of Jesus forms and shapes a believer into one who is Christ-like. Far too often, church leaders know intellectually about discipleship and yet their lives may not reflect an absolute allegiance to Jesus above all else.

Juan Sanchez

Two major lessons I will take with me. First, we must never presume upon the Lord's grace. The Lord is sovereign, and we must seek him as we make plans. Only what the Lord wills happens. So we must seek his will. Secondly, ecclesiology matters. We are not a perfect church by any stretch of the imagination. We have many flaws, and our membership is filled with sinners. Nevertheless, our desire to establish a biblical ecclesiology mattered in the long run. The ascended Christ has structured his church to fulfill its mission (Eph 4:11). Jesus is building his church on the foundation of the gospel. And we must not build the church on any other foundation. As we seek to be faithful, the Lord is responsible for fruitfulness. Pursuing a biblical ecclesiology allows us to organize ourselves in a way in which we are led by faithful pastors and rooted in the gospel word. As the pastor preach and teach that word, the church speaks that word to one another in love until we all reach Christlike maturity. It's not rocket science, but it is not easy to do. Still, slow, steady, and faithful wins the race. We plant the seed. Someone else may come along and water. God causes the growth.

IN OTHER WORDS...

“However much the rich man in his avarice piles up his wealth
(Which is never enough!) with flowing streams of gold
And loads his neck with Red Sea pearls
And plows his fat fields with hundreds of oxen,
Gnawing care will not leave him while he lives,
Nor does his light wealth go with him dead.”

Boethius, *On the Consolation of Philosophy* (524)

“And this province [Essex] to wit being visited with the disaster of the foresaid mortal sickness, Sighere with the people over whom he ruled, forsaking the sacraments of the Christian faith, fell into apostasy. For both the king himself and a number of the people as well as of the nobles, loving this life and not seeking after the life to come, or even not believing in any such life at all, began to restore their temples which stood desolate and to worship idols, as though they could thereby be protected from the mortal sickness. Furthermore, Sebbi his companion and co-heir of the same kingdom with all under him kept the faith he had received with great devotion and completed his faithful life, as we shall hereafter declare, in great felicity.”

Venerable Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation* (ca. 731)

“A truth, a doctrine, or a religion need no space for themselves. They are simply disembodied entities. They are heard, learnt and apprehended, and that is all. But the incarnate Son of God needs not only ears or hearts, but living men who will follow him. That is why he called his disciples into a literal, bodily following, and thus made his fellowship with them a visible reality. That

fellowship was founded and sustained by Jesus Christ, the incarnate Lord himself....

“The body of the exalted Lord is also a visible body in the shape of the Church.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship* (1937)

“It is not only in worship that the community is edified and edifies itself. But it is here first that this continually takes place. And if it does not take place here, it does not take place anywhere.... Here all Christians are present and not merely a few individuals.... From this centre it can and should spread out into a wider circle of the everyday life of Christians and their individual relationships.”

Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (1955)

“Most Americans, including preachers, have difficulty accepting the truth, if they think about it at all, that not all forms of discourse can be converted from one medium to another. It is naïve to suppose that something that has been expressed in one form can be expressed in another without significantly changing its meaning, texture or value.”

Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (1986)

[On the woman at the well, John 4] “Jesus came to the fountain as a hunter.... He threw a grain before one pigeon that he might catch the whole flock.... At the beginning of the conversation he did not make himself known to her, but first she caught sight of a thirsty man, then a Jew, then a Rabbi, afterwards a prophet, last of all the Messiah. She tried to get the better of the thirsty man, she showed dislike for the Jew, she heckled the Rabbi, she was swept off her feet by the prophet, and she adored the Christ.”

Ephraem the Syrian, d. 373

“There is no question but that a man usually acts more intelligently, shows more strength, and to all appearances more self-control, when under the scrutiny of others than when he believes himself to be unobserved. But the question is whether this intelligence, this strength, this self-control is real, or whether through the devotion of long-continued attention to it, it does not easily slip into the lie of simulation which kindles the unsteady blush of double-mindedness in his soul. Each one who is not more ashamed before himself than before all others, if he is placed in difficulty and much tried in life, will, in one way or another, end by becoming the slave of men. For to be more ashamed in the presence of others than when alone, what else is this than to be more ashamed of seeming than of being? And turned about, should not a man be more ashamed of what he is than of what he seems?”

Søren Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart* (1847)

“The church is not a people united by common ideas, ideas which collectively go under the name ‘Christianity.’ When the Bible speaks of a people united by faith it does not simply mean that we have the same beliefs about reality. Though the New Testament does use ‘faith’ to refer to a set of teachings (e.g., 1 Cor 16:13; 1 Tim 4:1; 2 Tim 4:7), ‘faith’ stretches out to include one’s entire ‘stance’ in life, a stance that encompasses beliefs about the world but also unarticulated or inarticulable attitudes, hopes, and habits of thought, action, or feeling. To be of ‘one mind’ (Phil 1:27) means to share projects, aspirations, and ventures, not merely to hold to the same collection of doctrines. Besides, the church is united not only by one *faith* but also by one *baptism* (Eph 4:4–6), manifests her unity in common participation in one *loaf* (1 Cor 10:17), and lives together in mutual deference, submission, and love....

Scripture does present a certain view of the world that has true propositional content. But it is an error, and a fatal one, to suggest that, once we have systematized the propositional content of Scripture, the result is a ‘worldview’ called Christianity to which we can give our assent.... [I]t is a radical distortion to think of Scripture’s teaching as an ‘ism.’”

Peter Leithart, *Against Christianity* (2003)

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