

# A Worshipping Community on a Mandated Break

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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 10:31–32<sup>1</sup>) 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).

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<sup>1</sup> 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.”<sup>2</sup> 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.”<sup>3</sup> 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).”<sup>4</sup> 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

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

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

<sup>4</sup> 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).<sup>5</sup>

How shall we translate *ekklesia*? Traditionally, in English, we use the word “church” in translations of the Bible,<sup>6</sup> 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).<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> The current standard Greek-English lexicon for the New Testament (BDAG) agrees with Tyndale, suggesting the glosses “assembly” or “gathering” or “community” or “congregation,”

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

<sup>6</sup> 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.

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

<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

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 *ēdah* (149 times). In the LXX, *qahal* often (73 times) becomes *ekklesia*, but is also often (35 times) rendered as *synagoge* (συναγωγή). *Ēdah* 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.<sup>10</sup>

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

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<sup>9</sup> 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.

<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> The same is true of Philo—and Paul.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> 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.

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<sup>11</sup> 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”).

<sup>12</sup> 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.”

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

<sup>14</sup> 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).<sup>15</sup> 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,<sup>16</sup> 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).<sup>17</sup>

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

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<sup>15</sup> 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.

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

<sup>17</sup> 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.”<sup>18</sup>

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](http://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.”<sup>19</sup> 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.”<sup>20</sup> What Milliken and Brooks are advocating is a version of

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<sup>18</sup> 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.

<sup>19</sup> 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>.

<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup>

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.”<sup>22</sup> And forty years after Bonhoeffer, Woody Allen observed that “showing up is eighty percent of success.”<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup> 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*]

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

<sup>22</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 29.

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

<sup>24</sup> 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."<sup>25</sup> In *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer recognized that the gift of community could be taken away at any moment,<sup>26</sup> 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."<sup>27</sup>

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

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<sup>25</sup> 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.

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

<sup>27</sup> 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.<sup>28</sup> 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.<sup>29</sup> 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?”<sup>30</sup>

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

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<sup>28</sup> See Trebilco, *Self-designations*, 171.

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

<sup>30</sup> 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.”<sup>31</sup> 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

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<sup>31</sup> 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.”<sup>32</sup> 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 world<sup>33</sup>—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

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<sup>32</sup> Hunter, *To Change the World*, 244.

<sup>33</sup> 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.”<sup>34</sup> 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.<sup>35</sup>

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

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<sup>34</sup> 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.

<sup>35</sup> Douglass, *Narrative*, 94.

an avowed enemy of Rome, the other Rome's employee.<sup>36</sup> (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."<sup>37</sup> 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."<sup>38</sup>

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.

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<sup>36</sup> 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).

<sup>37</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 202.

<sup>38</sup> 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 Hunter<sup>39</sup>

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.

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<sup>39</sup> Hunter, *To Change the World*, 184.

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