'INSULT TO THE INCARNATION'?
ONLINE TECHNOLOGY AND CHRISTIAN WORSHIP AFTER COVID-19
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Introduction

Churches in the United States began shutting their doors around mid-March 2020, joining government-initiated efforts to help fight the spread of COVID-19. Generally speaking, churches responded with freedom and creativity regarding the potential forms that continued gathering for worship might take. Exceptional circumstances blended with uncertainty to provoke quick thinking and prayerful discussion toward creative solutions that sought to remain anchored within spectrums of *orthodoxy* ('correct belief') and *orthopraxy* ('correct practice').

While certain parts of the country have begun a gradual return to normal and other areas fear a 'second wave' of the virus, some pastors and leaders urgently remind us that current practices of online worship gatherings (via Zoom, for example) should be viewed as temporary. Author and pastor Brian Zahnd warns in a recent blog, 'Don't let a pandemic turn you into a gnostic'.[1] Zahnd expresses his thinking rather starkly in that blog: 'To prefer digital over enfleshed is a gnostic move; it's a move away from what it means to be human; it's an insult to the Incarnation'. This indictment is unnecessarily strong. Pastor Zahnd fails to consider Christian experience beyond his immediate context within a relatively free Western society. He accounts for none of the many positive contributions to a corporate worship experience by video-conferencing technology. His well-intended but misplaced concern equates 'digital' with 'disembodied', which must therefore be 'gnostic'. Pastors and thinkers like Zahnd are *right* to be concerned that fellow evangelicals are more gnostic than Christian in their basic theological outlook. However, I believe that churches *should* seriously consider the practical possibilities and re-visit the theological implications of integrating digital technology into their customary methods of corporate worship.[2] To that end, I will challenge the premise that digital

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[1] Brian Zahnd, 'Don't Let a Pandemic Turn You into a Gnostic', Brian Zahnd (blog), 16 April 2020, https://brianzahnd.com/2020/04/dont-let-a-pandemic-turn-you-into-a-gnostic. Accessed online: 19 April 2020.

[2] I have chosen not include a section concerning the weaknesses and dangers posed by online community as a form of worship. Others, such as Brian Zahnd, Laura Turner, and Janet Thompson, speak to a number of the potential pitfalls. In addition to Zahnd's blog, see Laura Turner, 'Opinion: Internet Church Isn't Really Church', *New York Times*, 15 December 2018: https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/15/opinion/sunday/church-live-streaming-religion.html. Accessed online 8 May 2020; Janet Thompson, 'Is Watching Church Online Really the Same as Going in Person?', Crosswalk.com, 10 January 2018: https://www.crosswalk.com/church/worship/is-watching-church-online-really-the-same-as-going-in-person.html. Accessed online 8 May 2020. I also refer the curious reader to the following specialized studies: Rae Earnshaw, Richard Guedj, Andries van Dam, and John Vince, eds., *Frontiers of Human-Centred Computing, Online Communities and Virtual Environments* (London: Springer, 2001); Allison Kavanaugh, 'From Culture to Connection: Internet Community Studies', *Sociology Compass* 3:1 (January 2009), 1-15; Heidi A. Campbell and Allesandra Vitullo, 'Assessing Changes in the Study of Religious Communities in Digital

communication equals disembodied fellowship before providing a few examples of its contributions toward some marginalized groups during the COVID-19 crisis. I advocate here for further discussions that admit the possibility for legitimately adding video-conferencing technology to conventional approaches of contemporary worship services. In other words—and I hope to be very clear here—I am arguing for integration rather than replacement.

Digital vs. Spiritual

Pastor Zahnd writes in his blog that 'at its core, Gnosticism believes that the [end goal] of salvation is a pure spiritual (virtual?) existence'. He equates the virtual or digital environment with gnostic spirituality, 'pure' and untainted by earthly or fleshly matter. By contrast, according to Zahnd: '... Christianity is a sacramental religion. It takes water and oil, bread and wine to properly practice our faith. It's a faith where we lay hands on the sick and greet one another with a holy kiss—or at least a hearty handshake'. Therefore, he urges us not to 'normalize what is a move away from what it means to be human'. In other words, online gatherings via Zoom are an unfortunate necessity as the only other option is not coming together at all for worship. Don't get used to this, Zahnd is saying, it is not the way things are meant to be.

First, I want to respectfully challenge such views by suggesting that 'digital' is not a term interchangeable with 'spiritual' in the gnostic sense. Not all who express a greater resonance with or preference for attending church services online are necessarily declaring themselves as 'spiritual, but not religious'. For at least a couple of decades, this has been a trendy phrase used by people with a rather superficial connection to Christianity—Jesus may be a figure of some attraction, but 'organized religion' is a complete turn-off. The theological heresy here is in the assumption that Jesus can be loved while his body (the church) is rejected. In practical terms, it presumes that it is possible to be a Christian—i.e., to receive salvation from God through Christ's atonement—with no connection to the church.

This is not what I believe most people are really saying when they demonstrate excitement about their experiences with online worship gatherings. I do not believe they suggest or insist that gathering online can or should permanently replace the assembly of believers within the same physical space. It is unfair comparing such people with those who claim to be Christians but refuse to join their brothers and sisters in *any* type of fellowship. Forms and means may differ but gathering together still occurs in an online worship service. The Holy Spirit brings Christians together to constitute the church, and his ability to do so does not depend on the absence of technology. If such were the case, then every congregation making use of lights, smoke machines, sound systems, air conditioning, heating, and electricity would be unable to legitimately refer to themselves as 'church'. It seems absurd to suggest that the Spirit is limited or quenched by wi-fi signals and computer screens. Rather, 'disembodiment' is evident in refusing relationship in any form—not by creatively experimenting with new ways of being with and loving each other despite any physical or spatial limitations.

Religion Studies', *Church, Communication and Culture* 1:1 (2016), 73-89; Benjamin Peters, ed., *Digital Keywords: A Vocabulary of Information Society and Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); and Tim Hutching, *Creating Church Online: Ritual, Community and New Media* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

Second, I do not accept the premise that digital communication over physical distance equals 'disembodied fellowship'. Consider the following example from early Christian history. Scattered as they were in small numbers throughout and beyond the Roman Empire, Christian bishops maintained fellowship through exchanging letters. Such correspondence could be written in the bishop's own hand or verbally dictated to others. Communion was maintained among the churches led by these bishops despite long distances, dangerous travel conditions, and the excruciating slowness of communication. There were no complaints about 'disembodied fellowship' whenever the bishop of Rome received a letter from the bishops of Alexandria or Carthage. Genuine communion did not depend on Christians simultaneously inhabiting the same physical space. Indeed, Christian theology and organization developed significantly as a partial result of trading written correspondence. The fact that these letters were written on papyri by someone's hand rather than typed on a screen makes no difference. Communications tools like Zoom enable us to speak with, listen to, and even see one another across vast distances in real-time. Relationships can be initiated, maintained, *and* deepened even when we cannot be physically present with one another.

I implied earlier that the Holy Spirit can and does work through technology to gather believers and constitute the worshiping Christian community. I will add here that using technology does not necessarily involve a loss of humanity. If that were true, (in addition to the examples listed above), churches would have to deactivate their security alarm systems and store their financial records in some other way than on computers (they would also have to stop using pens, pencils, and paper!). Technology is part of what it *means* to be human. Where the tools we need do not exist, we invent them—experimenting to discover what serves our purpose while discarding what does not (or does so no longer). We use our brains. We use our hands. We draw from the earth's resources to create, operate, maintain, and improve upon technology. The fact that so many churches could so quickly and creatively find various methods of continuing meet together is a testimony to a very *human* ingenuity.

Online Worship and the Marginalized

Countless groups could be identified as 'marginalized', whether or not they would refer to themselves as such. However, it is simply not possible to cover them all in this section: I realize that mentioning a few contributes unintentionally to the marginalization of other groups that are not dealt with here. Those I have discussed may share some similarities with others that I do not explicitly consider. For example, some of the characteristics described below in relation to introverts could also apply to forms of autism, social anxiety, and agoraphobia. However, acknowledging this could be interpreted as wrongly equating a personality trait (introversion) with a developmental disorder (autism) or mental health condition (social anxiety and agoraphobia). There is simply no way to account for every form of marginalization, and I can only recognize this limitation.

Many churches and individual Christians claim to be on the side of society's marginalized. Integrating online communications technology into methods of corporate worship is one further means of demonstrating such professed solidarity. The COVID-motivated transition to online church services has allowed many who are sick, elderly, or severely disabled to participate more

fully than they were able to before. They have been involved with public worship in real-time along with every other member of their congregation (who now have a taste of what it's like to be a 'shut-in'). Where provisions are made for all, they may partake of the bread and cup of communion at the same time as everyone else, rather than later if someone remembers to visit them. Other members of the congregation can more easily learn who they are, put a name with a face, and remember them as part of the church community—not just the unfortunate objects of 'ministry' on the margins. In other words, some of the marginalized have become less so as a direct result of incorporating online methods of being a worshiping community.

I'll give one example from the church my wife and I regularly attend. There is a severely disabled man who belongs to this church. On one of our first Sunday mornings here, we heard what sounded to us like a loud moaning during one of the songs. We later learned that it was the sound of this man praising God with his whole heart at the top of his lungs despite the limitations of his disability. He is also unable to speak with the same clarity many of us might take for granted. However, Zoom's chat function allows us the effortless privilege of perceiving his heart and mind as his words appear on our screens. During one recent service at this church, I was moved to tears at how this technology enabled him to write a simple, personal greeting to me. Neither he nor I were hindered in our ability to communicate with each other. We both experienced full participation as well as a new level of communion, and technology made that very *human* connection possible.

There is another group of people who are often overlooked not only by larger society, but also (sadly) in churches. Introverts are not usually identified as 'marginalized', but some of them may have valid experiences of marginalization. Introverts too often find themselves forced to adapt within circumstances and environments that are considered 'normal' relative to the standards of extroverts. But their needs, preferences, and perspectives are treated as deficient rather than merely different.[3]

Some introverts dread the ritualized greeting (or what some churches call 'the passing of the peace') more than any other part of a church service. Shyness plays a role for some, but not all. For introverts who tend to feel as well as think deeply, it can often be experienced as the least authentic part of the entire service: *Why can't she look me in the eye? Why didn't he shake my hand more firmly?* Additionally, the greeting often involves a cacophony of voices uttering what can be perceived by some as inane, merely conventional platitudes. People are moving everywhere, and the introvert is suddenly faced with a multitude of choices in an unwelcome conflict between social acceptability and personal boundaries. It is hard for some introverts to simply to sort through (much less successfully respond to) the extraordinary amounts of outward and inward stimuli during the greeting, and all of this can seem to last an eternity, so to speak. Introverts endure all this as best they can, and rarely speak up against any part of it. Contrary to the stereotype that introverts 'hate people', some (even many) actually *want* others to experience connection with them. However, they may be more likely to feel connected on a one-on-one

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[3] Adam S. McHugh, *Introverts in the Church: Finding Our Place in an Extroverted Culture* (2nd edn.; Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2017); Judson Edwards, *Quiet Faith: An Introvert's Guide to Spiritual Survival* (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2013); and Mark Tanner, *The Introvert Charismatic: The Gift of Introversion in a Noisy Church* (Oxford: Monarch, 2015).

basis through deep two-way conversation over a more sustained period than a quick handshake. If 'experiencing communion' is truly the goal, then the passing of the peace is a method for doing so that introverts would generally prefer to pass on entirely and during which they feel anything but 'peace'.

However, the online worship experience positively encourages introverts (i.e., without any kind of pressure placed on them) to participate fully to the extent that is consistent with how they are made. The introvert is liberated and empowered to turn off their video or sound, thus managing the overpowering sounds of simultaneous chit-chat along with increasing one's sense of privacy and security. Zoom, to again use this means of communication as an example, displays my full name and I've uploaded a photograph of my face so that people can still see who I am. I can type my greetings to individuals or the church as a whole if I choose not to do this using the microphone. There is no pressure to shake any hands, no feeling awkward or overlooked if no one shakes mine. All of this is *inclusion*, not disembodiment.

Extroverts may be anxious for everything to go back to normal in churches exactly as before. But after the brief taste of liberty enjoyed by many introverts, a 'return to normal' may for some of them sound more like a nightmare scenario. How, in the wake of COVID-19, can churches do a better job of *truly* including introverts in ways that resonate with rather than terrifying or exhausting them? How might Christians do a better job of respecting introverts as people who are different rather than broken or inferior to extroverts? How might we improve our efforts to seek out the marginalized, the alienated, the sick, the elderly, and the disabled on their terms rather than our own? Or will we just keep paying fashionable lip service to them while our actions or inaction further contribute to their actual exclusion?

Conclusion

Thinkers and leaders like Brian Zahnd are right to warn us against letting this pandemic experience adversely affect our beliefs and practices. But charges relating to 'gnosticism' do not definitively apply to the online worship experience. Rather, as I hope I've shown, integrating such methods into the more traditional forms of 'doing church' contributes to and enhances (instead of detracting from) our humanity. Pastors and worship leaders ought to consider adding something new to the forms in which we are accustomed to gathering for worship—doing so in a spirit of creative open-ness rather than excessive caution. Asking ourselves 'Can we do that?' is better than asking no questions at all. However, I have tried to help us adjust our perspective to where the question we might ask ourselves as we move beyond COVID-19 with its limits on our structures and routines is: 'What *more* can we do?' What more can be done to hold change and continuity in effective balance? What more can be done to enhance *all* aspects of our humanity, including our ingenuity in developing and using technology? What more can be done to extend God's transforming love to various marginalized groups, and how might technology make invaluable contributions in that regard? From this view, the outright rejection of online worship experiences as illegitimate forms of Christian worship seems much closer to 'Gnostic' in repudiating human diversity, human creativity, and yes, human technology.