Heb. 10:19-25
"Is the Virtual Church Really a Church?"

19 Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus,
 20 by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh,
 21 and having a High Priest over the house of God,
 22 let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.
 23 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful.
 24 And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works,
 25 not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.

As you are probably very well aware, God can and does take the worst of things and bring good out of them. For instance, over the centuries even heresy and error have been of value to the church, because they have forced her to answer those errors and in so doing to make carefully study of the truth and then to boldly proclaim it and take her stand for it. In this way countless generations of Believers are enriched. For instance, it was the crying need for further Reformation in the British church of the 17th century that led to the Westminster Assembly and the Westminster Standards. Over a millennia before that it was the desire to craft a biblical response to the host of heretical views regarding the nature of Christ that produced the great ecumenical creeds of the church like the Nicene Creed, and before even that we have inspired books of scripture that were written in response to the errors and problems of the the Apostolic church. The epistle to the Galatians, for instance, is obviously written in response to the Judaizing error that was infecting the Galatian churches, and the epistle we have read from today was written in response to the problem of believing Jews who were giving up on their attendance of churches and returning to the synagogues in order to avoid persecution. As Matthew Henry summarizes - ***The design of this epistle was to persuade and press the believing Hebrews to a constant adherence to the Christian faith, and perseverance in it, notwithstanding all the sufferings they might meet with in so doing.*** *"* Hence the exhortation of the author here not to forsake the assembling of one another together, and he acknowledges that if that is to happen then the believers will have to exhort one another, and stir one another up as they saw the day of the Lord approaching and persecution becoming ever more fierce.

Obviously, errors and heresies in the church have continued up to the present day, and sometimes they seem like they are multiplying as never before. Some of the most pernicious at present, are those which seek to take believers out of the churches, and thus cause them to stop assembling together, and instead to get them to worship at home. One of the promoters of this trend, George Barna, calls this the "unchurching" movement and he hails it as a good thing and the wave of the future for Christianity, whether Christians leave to form house churches, or even when it involves replacing attending church with "golf fellowships" made up of Christian men who glorify god by spending Sunday playing 18 holes. As David Wells comments: *"Now, serious spiritual revolutionaries can simply cut themselves loose from the local church. Just walk away! Permanently. And find biblical Christianity elsewhere.*

What is resulting from Barna's approach is barely recognizable as Christian today." One of the more recent trends in the unchurching movement is the so-called virtual church, where people simply watch church services on the internet. So it's worth asking how did we evangelicals get to this point and is this really church?

Well for almost thirty years now church marketing gurus like Barna have been working to fundamentally change the pattern of evangelical churches. Instead of taking the commands of God in scripture as the starting place for determining how to go about structuring the church, the trend these gurus introduced was to remold the church after the model of the modern retail business. In the world of American commerce, first the homogeneous chain-store began to replace the smaller local mom and pop store, and then the chain stores were brought together in the one-stop shopping experience of the modern American shopping-mall. Following this model, church marketers have replaced smaller local congregations with larger, homogeneous, seeker-sensitive churches and in turn these seeker-sensitive churches have grown to become the modern megachurch offering a "one stop" shopping experience for the modern worshipper. It is not uncommon to find everything from a coffee-bar to exercise classes all housed in these large modern worship facilities. But commerce, as always, has moved on, and even the trip to the mall (with all its attendant parking and walking problems) has become a hassle for many modern consumers. The solution to those hassles is to do your shopping from home via the internet. Between 2001 and 2006 online business by three hundred percent. Even the chain stores view it as a must to have internet commerce alongside of their traditional "brick and mortar" locations. Modern megachurches have followed the same trends, first by introducing "satellite locations" which allowed worshipers to experience the finely crafted worship of the main church on large screens in a smaller congregation and without having to travel long distances or deal with the parking difficulties that come when thousands of congregants assemble. According to Outreach magazine in 2000 only 5% of megachurches were "multi-site" but by 2010 it is expected that over half will be.

Now the megachurches are taking the logical next step in following commercial trends - **Online Worship**.

Now worshippers don't even have to get dressed and drive to a satellite location in order to watch worship on a screen. Instead, they can experience the same excellent worship without the inconveniences of actually changing out of their sleepwear into comfortable clothes, driving to church, finding a parking spot, and having to deal with actual people. Internet worship also offers many other consumer conveniences not possible at traditional "brick and mortar" churches such as the ability to chat and network with other worshipers while the service is going on (without people thinking you are being rude), the ability to ask questions of an "internet pastor" when they occur to you instead of having to wait, and best of all, now you know you'll always have the "best seat in the house" - unless your spouse grabs it first. Technically, it should be possible to even "pause" worship in order for you to get a snack, answer the phone, or go to the bathroom.

But is the online worshiper really attending a church, or even really worshiping?

What is clear from the bible is that in every age the Lord has been saving people not in order to create autonomous Christian units but to make them part of His body, the church. As we are told in Acts 2:47 "And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved." The church is the ekklesia, a word used in both the Septuagint (the Greek version of the Old Testament) and the New Testament to indicate the assembly or congregation of the Lord. All of these biblical words, assembly, congregation, and body were chosen deliberately by God to emphasize the idea that the saints are called to be a group

that is not only separated from the world, but brought together. His body is a visible union of many members that He brings together (Romans 12:4-5). Throughout biblical and church history, Christians have understood the necessity of being part of that assembly and have consequently joined themselves to particular congregations in which they have enjoyed the Lord's blessings. In fact, from a biblical perspective an adult simply cannot claim that they are a member of church if they have not covenanted with a particular congregation, been baptized, and are a member in good standing actually taking the Lord's Supper and thus communing with other believers. Those who only watch church on the internet are manifestly also not under the umbrella of church discipline and are still outside of the church and thus still in an unchurched condition. Such a person is disobeying the Lord's command in Hebrews 10:25 by "forsaking the assembling of ourselves together" (Hebrews 10:24-25)

When it comes to biblical church discipline, the bible makes it clear in places like Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5 that the members of the church will be aware of what is going on in one another's lives and will be obedient to the commands to keep one another accountable, even pointing out sins when that is needed. The presumption is that if a brother or sister who is part of the assembly will not turn from their sins and repent, they must be cast out of the assembly as Paul puts it "put away from yourselves the evil person." We call this process of being put away excommunication, and its ultimate purpose is the purifying of the body and the restoration of the offender. But how does one excommunicate the internet worshiper? Ban their IP address perhaps? The person isn't actual communing, therefore to excommunicate them isn't even applicable, all of which speaks to the fact that they aren't really members of the church at all.

These home churches also do not have anything like a biblical church government with the Elders and Deacons that the New Testament considers an integral part of the church. In Acts 14:23 one of the first things Paul and Barnabas did in planting new churches was to ordain elders, and Paul painstakingly lists the qualifications for these officers in 1 Tim. 3 and Titus 1 and Peter in his epistle treats them as normative. 1 Peter 5:5 states "Likewise you younger people, submit yourselves to your elders." How does one submit if they don't exist?

In place of these elders some virtual church leaders encourage: **Pastor Hunter:** It is in development right now. Because of the philosophy that we have we are probably not going to emphasize those larger congregations that are multi sites. Once you get past a 100 people you need a certain leader with a certain skill set and a certain gift mix to develop that big a group. And that big a group also carries with it its own expense and it carries its own rate of failure (the failure of church plants in the nation). So what we are going to concentrate on are leaders of small congregations. That is, you know, a dozen, 20. That anybody can take responsibility for if they have the ongoing support and reference to people who have been trained as pastors and can support them in that in that way.

For a long time here we have done small group leadership. **We have virtually ordained small group leaders**. **They do some of the baptisms in our church, funerals, and some of the marriages so that it all doesn't have to go back to a large church leader for those sacerdotal functions.**

Ultimately what we want to do is to take any group anywhere that has three or more and somebody wants to take spiritual responsibility for this group we want to take that person and mentor them and to provide resources for them. I am not talking about money but about communication. **If a person in our own congregation decides to take on that spiritual leadership for a small group, they become a spiritual leader in every sense. This has already happened in our history. So we know it works. We cannot form a church but we can equip those that are coming to Christ to bring their friends**

together to form and a church and we can appoint a spiritual leader where they are to guide them"

But not only is an internet worshiper always missing out on two of the important marks of the true church, namely the biblical administration of the sacraments, and biblical church discipline, he is also missing out on one of the most important parts of life in the body of Christ - fellowship and accountability. The pastor and members of the main church usually aren't even aware of their virtual worshipers, and certainly aren't able to keep track of how thousands of internet viewers are doing spiritually. The reality is that they don't really know one another at all, and for a shepherd not to know the sheep, and the body not to know the other parts is tragic.

Additionally, every Christian has been given gifts which the Lord intends us to put to use for Him in serving the other members of the body. As Paul says: "For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them" (Romans 12:4-6a) This simply cannot happen amongst online worshipers. How does one use the gifts God desires be put to use in ministering to the body when we never actually meet the other members of the body? Additionally, the kind of ongoing multigenerational training that happens as older women train and teach younger women and older men train and teach younger men is also missing from the online community. Simply put, the kind of training and daily modeling that goes on in Titus 2 presumes a living breathing community of believers in close communion and contact with one another.

For all of these reasons, I strongly believe the Dutch and Belgian protestants at the time of the Reformation where expressing a scriptural truth when they confessed regarding the duty of all believers to join themselves to a true church: *"We believe, since this holy congregation is an assembly of those who are saved, and outside of it there is no salvation, that no person of whatsoever state or condition he may be, ought to withdraw from it, content to be by himself; but that all men are in duty bound to join and unite themselves with it; maintaining the unity of the Church; submitting themselves to the doctrine and discipline thereof; bowing their necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ; and as mutual members of the same body, serving to the edification of the brethren, according to the talents God has given them." (The Belgic Confession of Faith, Article XXVIII)*

As to whether the person watching a service online is worshipping we need to consider that there are three kinds of worship that Christians are called to enter into, the kind of personal worship we do alone in our private devotions, the daily worship we do as a family, and most importantly the corporate worship of the gathered church. This corporate worship we enter into on earth is actually a model of the eternal corporate worship of the assembly of God's people in heaven. In a sense, on Sunday as we gather with the church we are "practicing" for heaven and enjoying an all-too-brief and imperfect foretaste of the perfection of heavenly worship. When someone is worshipping online, they have not joined with God's people, they are not "gathered" or "assembled" together with the body of Christ. What they are doing is confusing two different kinds of worship by attempting to privately engage in corporate worship on the Lord's Day when they are supposed to be corporately gathered together in His name.

Now one can understand having to do something like this "virtual worship" if one is a soldier deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan without regular access to an orthodox protestant chapel service. But most soldiers will tell you they do not fare nearly as well spiritually under such conditions and cannot wait

to return to the real worship of their home church. Most servicemen would not choose "virtual church" if they didn't have to, anymore than they would choose to maintain "virtual" contact with their family and only communicate with their spouses and children via phone and internet once they got home. So to do this "virtual worshipping" by choice when there are living, breathing, orthodox Christian congregations within driving distance of your home is a terrible mistake, and while long term studies are not yet available, one can only speculate that the individuals who make this choice will not fare much better spiritually than the soldiers who have no other choice.

So who is to blame for this mess that leads people to remain in an unchurched condition while misleading them into thinking they are part of a church? In my opinion the blame does not lay primarily with the worshippers. They have merely bought into an idea peddled to them by megachurches that should have known better, and I believe the reason that many megachurches don't know better is that they seem to have forgotten that the church is in fact the ekklesia or body of Christ and see themselves simply as a spiritual business marketing products like "a relationship with Jesus" and a highly sensual experience called "worship." As David McDaniel, Director of Campus Expansion for North Point Ministries, tragically described the role of the megachurch in a recent article in Outreach magazine" What we're doing is providing empty chairs for people to come and worship during optimal hours." Now, if all the church was meant to be was a building containing chairs for Christians to sit in while they watch something described as "worship" in the same way they might watch a concert or a self-help speaker then yes, there really is no reason the chair should not be located in their living room, or the service unfold on a wide-screen TV as opposed to a JumboTron in an off-site location. The problem though is that often the megachurch definition of both church and worship is seriously unscriptural and instead of addressing that fundamental problem, megachurches are only compounding it.

Therefore, problems like the spread of the "virtual church" aren't going to be dealt with until evangelical churches reform and that will involve ceasing to take their model for church from modern consumer marketing techniques, and returning to the pattern for churches that God has given in the bible. Until that happens, the deceiver is going to have a field day by persuading people that they are "worshipping" and "in church" when in fact the only practical difference between them and their unchurched neighbors is what they occasionally watch on their computer screens.