

Introduction

As I write, in the Spring of 2020, the UK government's response to the Covid 19 virus – the lockdown – is having a massive impact on us all, the effects of which will not quickly fade when normality returns. Naturally, believers and their churches have not been exempt from this upheaval, and they have quickly responded. Since it raises some very serious questions, I want to subject that response to Scripture.

Two issues are of particular concern.

First, many churches – perhaps most – have reacted to the banning of public meetings by livestreaming; that is, by means of a digital package transmitted over the internet, they broadcast an approximate 'church service' which anyone can watch and/or listen to live, as it happens, or later, according to choice. The truth is, however, that 'livestreaming' is hardly a fitting description for much of it. Since meetings are banned, many so-called 'live services' are cut-and-paste jobs, carefully produced and then posted at the normal 'service' time. Even so, the livestreamers are ensuring that people can virtually attend 'a church service'. Some go further and include a form of baptism and the Lord's supper.¹

Second, some churches have used the internet to set up small groups which allow and nurture intensive interaction between participants who are specially invited to tune in. In

¹ The following appears under 'Sermon' in *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*: '[Those participating in the online Lord's supper were urged] to find soda crackers, Goldfish crackers, bread or some type of liquid and eat them at the appropriate point of the online sermon at home' (Domenica Bongiovanni: "Easter services are vital to Christians. Here's how Indianapolis churches are adapting", *Indianapolis Star*, 9th April 2020)'.

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this way, some believers are talking to each other far more than they would have done.

In the main, I will be addressing the first of these two responses. This must not be taken to mean that the second is unimportant; indeed, since small numbers with mutual interaction is precisely what believers experienced and valued in the *ekklēsia* in the days of the New Testament, I see this reaction to the lockdown as a very healthy sign, and I want my book to encourage the reality when things get back to normal. But it is the large meetings² and livestreaming on which I want to concentrate.

The technology, of course, was there before the crisis. Nevertheless, with the crisis, such internet activity has mushroomed. From the evidence I have seen, the provision of ‘a church service’ is proving very popular³ – though not, perhaps, as spiritually beneficial as the bald statistics might indicate.⁴

Even so, the fact remains that livestreaming is a response to the deeply-felt need of the overwhelming majority of believers to ‘attend church’; that is, to ‘go to a place of worship’ in order to ‘worship God’. While they cannot have the real or actual experience, they can, at least, have something like it in virtual form.⁵

² ‘Large’ is a relative term, of course. By ‘large’ I mean what would have been considered normal before the lockdown.

³ ‘A survey... last week found that almost one in four British adults have watched or listened to a religious service since lockdown began’ (Martin Bashir and Harry Farley: ‘Coronavirus: Churches may not be back to normal by end of year’, BBC News website, 10th May 2020). Note the ‘watched or listened to’.

⁴ It is generally accepted that the bare statistics of ‘hits’, ‘likes’ and ‘downloads’ can be grossly misleading. In much of this technology, people can drift in – and drift out – at the click of a ‘mouse’ or ‘zapper’, in many cases, a few seconds counting as ‘a hit’. Many make a hobby of ‘surfing the web’.

⁵ I have struggled over the use of ‘real’ or ‘actual’ as opposed to ‘virtual’.

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None of this is of passing significance. Hence my subtitle *Learning from the Lockdown*. Indeed, as I have said, this huge surge in internet activity raises underlying vital biblical principles, principles which we need to face: principles such as what we mean by ‘worship’, what we allude to when we speak of ‘service’, and what we understand by ‘church’. Take ‘worship’. What is it? How and when do believers ‘worship’ God? And what is ‘a service’? When is ‘a service’ not ‘a service’? Indeed, what is ‘a church’, and when is ‘a church’ not ‘a church’? What part, if any, do numbers play? And so on.

Unpopular as it will be to say it – shocking, incredible, to many – although ‘going to church’ to be part of, or experience, ‘a church service’ has been normal Christendom practice for most believers from time immemorial, it is quite unknown in the New Testament.⁶ This inevitably means that uncomfortable questions need to be asked – and answered – about what is going on. We must be honest, and face facts, even if – especially if – some of those facts are unwelcome. We need to take a hard look at all this, and do so with an open Bible.

Hence my book.

I am not alone, of course; others are concerned. But, although many are trying to think through the principles, in the blizzard of material which evangelical churches and their elders have produced in order to cope with the virus crisis, alas, I have come across scholastic and semantic reasoning of the angel-and-pinhead variety,⁷ much going outside Scripture to find ‘solutions’, and the invention of new titles

⁶ For an explanation of what I mean by ‘Christendom’, see Appendix 2 in my *Relationship*.

⁷ ‘Could several angels could be one place?’, asked Thomas Aquinas. Whether or not medieval scholars did debate how many angels could dance on the head of a pin, the saying is used to denote any involved but useless debate.

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for ‘services’, the result of which is to dig even deeper holes for believers and the churches.

We must do better than that!

Nor must we allow the technology to lead us by the nose. Because we *can* do something, it does not mean we *should* do it. Tradition, sentiment, technology and the like are no substitutes for Scripture. Inevitably we are children of our time; we cannot avoid the culture we have inherited, nor the culture we find ourselves in. But the world’s culture must not call the shots; Scripture must always trump all.⁸ That was God’s standing principle for Israel in the old covenant (Deut. 4:1-14; Is. 8:20), and it remains the same for the *ekklēsia* in the new (Acts 17:11; Rom. 15:4; 2 Tim. 3:16-17).

Moreover, we must not be guilty of short-termism. A temporary solution to a pressing problem has a habit of turning into a permanent tradition. The UK government’s knee-jerk reaction to a couple of crises thirty years ago is a case in point.⁹ Hastily produced knife-and-dog laws resulted in unforeseen consequences, tortuous ramifications and serious complications, some of which dog(!) us still. A closer parallel, one which had beneficial long-term effects, can be found in the medieval Church’s 1349 emergency relaxation of the rules of last rites during the Black Death. This temporary easing allowed men to think ‘heretical’ thoughts, culminating in the work of John Wycliffe. All I am

⁸ Many modern evangelicals put the world’s culture – its mindset – top of the list. Having worked out the way young people think, many adjust the way they address them. (For one modern evangelical’s advocacy of constantly adapting gospel presentation to the culture, see ‘Tim Keller on How to Bring the Gospel to Post-Christian America’). But if, in doing that, the gospel itself is changed, disaster is inevitable. I intend to return to this in a forthcoming volume.

⁹ The Dangerous Dog Act was introduced in 1991 because of a spate of dog attacks. Knife Laws were introduced in 1988 because of serious – some fatal – attacks with knives. Haste marked the introduction of both, leaving a legacy of legal niceties.

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saying is that short-term can so easily, and unintentionally, turn out to be long-term.

What will be the long-term effect of all this recent church use of the internet in response to the lockdown? What lessons can we, as believers, learn? Even more important, are there any changes that we need to make to what we have, for centuries – without serious thought on the part of many – come to regard as normal practice, even as scriptural? Could it be that this lockdown is, in part, God’s trumpet blast to awaken us to serious consideration and – if we find it necessary – reformation in our church life? If so, will we learn and, if need be, change? Can we? Or are things so deeply ingrained that nothing will shift us? When normality returns, will we simply drift back to things as they were before all this happened, and take up where we left off? Even worse, will we pick up some bad habits during this time, and turn them into the new norm? Or shall we recover some good – that is, scriptural – practices?

We can, of course, simply assume that what we were doing before the crisis, and what we are now doing during the crisis, is right, and carry on regardless, but as believers this cannot be right: we must always be ensuring that we are scriptural.

This book is my contribution to this necessary discussion.

It consists of three parts.

In Part 1, I briefly set out the New Testament teaching on the *ekklēsia*. Before we get to what we were doing, what we are now doing, and what we might be doing when the lockdown is lifted, it is essential for us to be clear about what we should be doing.

In Part 2, I look at the contemporary church.¹⁰

¹⁰ I am trying to distinguish between the *ekklēsia* – the New Testament or new-covenant people of God – and the church, the contemporary Christendom scene.

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Part 3 consists of various Appendices.

When quoting others, I have, on occasion, lightly edited the extracts, but never to change the sense; indeed, I note any serious alteration.