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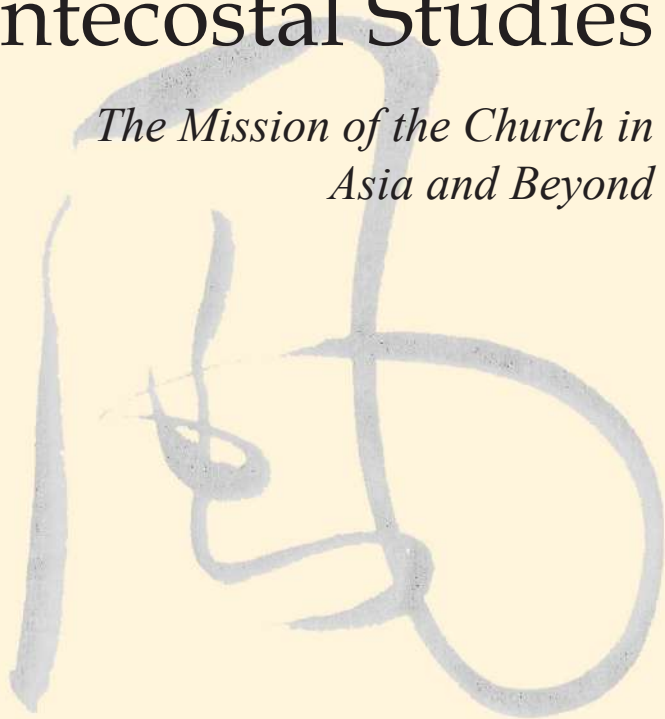
The Mission of the Church in Asia and Beyond

Why Should Believers Gather Together?
A Theological and Exegetical Examination of Hebrews 10:24-25
in View of the Nature, Purpose, and Future of the Church

By Jemon Laguna Subang

Introduction

This paper aims to show that (1) vibrant and healthy relationships in the church cannot be established through the use of digital technology, and (2) the deep level of relationships between people, including the dynamics of Christian love and service taught and required in the NT, demands in-person gathering. For these reasons, there is a pressing need to inspire, encourage, and provoke Christian churches to continue their in-person gatherings. The church community is integral to the holistic development of the Christian life. Human relationships are built and sustained through meaningful communication.

Technology makes communication easier and almost accessible to most parts of the world, changing nearly every facet of human life.[1] However, there is an inherent limitation to technology. It lacks the facility to improve human relationships. Easy access to communication does not guarantee meaningful and genuine conversations.[2]

With the advent of COVID-19, governments imposed social distancing to abate the coronavirus spread.[3] As a result, in many places like the Philippines, in-person church meetings were banned. Hence, churches relied on the use of digital technology for church ministries. Digital technology has become the answer to the problem of social

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[1]Ralf Peter Reimann, "'Uncharted Territories': The Challenges of Digitalization and Social Media for Church and Society," *The Ecumenical Review* 69, no. 1 (2017): 70–71, doi:10.1111/erev.12267 (accessed April 27, 2023).

[2]See Laurel Dovich, "Digital Media Technology and Your Spiritual Life: An Uneasy Alliance" (2017), *Christian Engineering Conference*. 2, 8-9, http://digital commons.cedarville.edu/christian_engineering_conference/2017/technological_development/2 (accessed April 28, 2023).

[3]Anna Cho, foreseeing the detrimental effects of social distancing on the church, comments that prolonged social distancing may lead to social isolation. And if this occurs, it will debilitate human interactions that may lead to a lack of community. In this case, the church being a "community of gathering," may also collapse (Anna Cho, "For the Church Community After COVID-19"), *Dialog* 60, no. 1 (March 2021): 2, https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/church-community-after-covid-19/docview/2510066671/se-2 (accessed April 28, 2023).

distancing. However, it also introduced new challenges that we must carefully confront. And the church needs to be vigilant about its effects and reexamine the spiritual hazards that come with technology.[4]

For many, technology is a gift from God. It saved the church from the debilitating and restricting effects of the coronavirus. How could the church survive the pandemic without Facebook and Zoom? Initially, many Christians hesitated to use these media platforms for Bible studies, prayer meetings, and Sunday worship services. But today, many churches consider media technology as integral to the life and function of the church. In other words, churches are becoming increasingly dependent on technology. Even before the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was already an article written in 2007 titled, "'Get on the Internet!' Says the LORD."[5] Many perceive the internet as a "point of contact" to influence lives and cyberspace as "divine space." If the Spirit uses the internet to convert sinners and encourage the saints, cyberspace should be a space for ministry and evangelism. Hence, Christians should employ every possible means within their reach to bring God's message to all creatures.[6] In 2019, Peter Singh, in his article, "Social Media: A New Location for Christian Mission to the Digitizens," recognizes technology as a visible sign of human creativity which resembles divine creativity. He argues that this human creativity displayed in technology is part of God's image in man. Hence, the presence and advancement of technology are observable signs of God's active participation in guiding and shaping human interactions and relationships.[7]

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[4]Andrew Brubacher Kaethler, "The Enduring Significance of the Incarnation for the Church in a Digital Age," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 39, no. 2 (2021): 97, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLAiE8N220606 000503&site=ehost-live (accessed April 26, 2023).

[5]See J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, "'Get on the Internet!' Says the LORD: Religion, Cyberspace, and Christianity in Contemporary Africa," *Studies in World Christianity* 13.3 (2007): 225–42, https://doi.org/10.1353/swc.2007.0026 (accessed April 26, 2023).

[6]Asamoah-Gyadu, "Get on the Internet!," 230; See J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, "Anointing Through the Screen: Neo Pentecostalism and Televised Christianity in Ghana," *Studies in World Christianity* 11.1 (2005), 9–28, https://doi.org/10.3366/swc. 2005.11.1.9 (accessed April 28, 2023); Many Pentecostals think of the internet as "digital superhighways" fast-tracking the speed of gospel ministry to the unreached and as an avenue for church discipleship (see Mark J. Cartledge, "Virtual Mediation of the Holy Spirit: Prospects for Digital Pentecostalism"), *PentecoStudies* 21, no. 1 (2022): 31-32, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct= true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLAiREM 220919000223&site=ehost-live (accessed April 28, 2023).

[7]M. Peter Singh, "Social Media: A New Location for Christian Mission to the Digitizens," *In God's Image* 38 (June 2019): 55–60, https://search.ebscohost.com/login. aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLAiAZI211108001107&site=ehost-live (accessed April 26, 2023); Singh's concern is how the church can access unlimited social media for mission and spiritual formation. He also asserts that "With the advent of new

The Adverse Effects of Media Technology

But there is another side to this view of cyberspace. Rob O'Lynn notes that individuals have always had a tenuous association with technology. For example, the same radiation invented to cure cancer can also be used to destroy lives.[8] The same technology that can help solve human finitude can have dehumanizing effects on humans.[9] Alan Jacobs notes, "Powerful technologies come to dominate the people they are supposed to serve and reshape us in their image."[10] Science reveals that there is a negative side to the use of digital technology on individuals. One study shows that even the moderate use of social media can lead to some mental health concerns among individuals.[11] Similarly, researchers

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technologies, Church is offered a variety of means for fulfilling her mission. How does the Church WhatsApp or tweet the Gospel? For her mission, the church must avail herself of the new resources provided by human exploration in social media. Digital changes are also opening up new opportunities for inter-denominational collaboration for mission . . . Therefore, with openness, Church must see the potentialities of information technologies positively as well as critically allowing social media and Church to interact with each other" (Ibid., 56). For additional discussion on the positive impacts of social media on doing church ministries, see J. T. Mullins, "Online Church: A Biblical Community," Order No. 3454046, Liberty University, 2011, https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/online-church-biblical-community/docview/868328414/se-2 (accessed April 28, 2023); and Tim Hutchings, "Creating Church Online: A Case-Study Approach to Religious Experience," *Studies in World Christianity* 13, no. 3 (2007): 243–60, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA 0001632472&site=ehost-live (accessed April 26, 2023).

[8]Rob O'Lynn, "What Comes Next: Continuing the Digital Ecclesiology Conversation in Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Religions* 13, no. 11 (2022): 1, https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/what-comes-next-continuing-digital-ecclesiology/docview/2734707173/se-2 (accessed April 26, 2023).

[9]Ashley John Moyse, *The Art of Living for a Technological Age: Toward a Humanizing Performance. Dispatches: Turning Points in Theology and Global Crises*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2021, xix; see O'Lynn, "What Comes Next," 1-2.

[10]Alan Jacobs, "From Tech Critique to Ways of Living," *The New Atlantis* 63 (Winter 2021): 25, quoted in Kaethler, "The Enduring Significance of the Incarnation for the Church in a Digital Age," 97.

[11]Emily A. Vogels, Risa Gelles-Watnick, and Navid Massarat, "Teens, Social Media and Technology," *Pew Research Center* (August 10, 2022): 1, https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2022/08/10/teens-social-media-and-technology-2022/ (accessed April 26, 2023); Also, Kaetler notes that despite the assertions that social media and web-based communications improve "community" and "connection," there is a growing recognition that the opposite occurs over time and that there is a correlation between the amount of time spent on social media and feelings of isolation, discontent with one's life, and mental health problems ("The Enduring Significance of the Incarnation for the Church in a Digital Age," 115); Other research shows that spending too much time on social media can lead to individuals feeling more lonely and remote—and heighten mental health problems such as anxiety and depression (see Lawrence Robinson and Melinda Smith, "The Role Social Media Plays in Mental Health," *Well-Being & Happiness,* (accessed April 28, 2023): 1-7, https://www.helpguide.org/

in the medical and mental fields affirm the danger of isolation and prolonged exposure to the screen. These unhealthy social media habits may lead to an increased risk of depression, anxiety, a feeling of loneliness, sleep disorder, self-harm, and even suicidal thoughts. [12] Conversely, they affirm the need for companionship and face-to-face interactions. Social interactions can help ease anxiety and depression, provide comfort and prevent depression.[13] Laurel Dovich, in her article on "Digital Media and Your Spiritual Life: An Uneasy Alliance," discerns that human beings are too engaged with digital technology that they do not give time for self-examination about how media is affecting their lives, relationships, worldviews, and spirituality.[14] Excessive use of media technology leads to a lack of focus and an inability to process information.[15]

Many scholars note that the two of the most significant challenges with using media technology are multitasking and distraction.[16] This is why individuals highly dependent on media technology can hardly focus on what is more important. Based on the studies done on multitasking, the result shows that multitasking increases errors and decreases the ability to retain information. Also, multitasking lowers performance and reduces productivity. The finding is contrary to what many think about the effects of multitasking. One study shows that students' performance while multitasking decreased by one-third, a similar result taken from drunk drivers. Researchers at Sandford found that multitaskers lose their ability to filter information and are hampered by irrelevant information.[17] Multitasking causes "attention difficulties, poor decision-making, lack of depth of material, information overload, internet addiction, poor sleep habits, overuse of caffeine, impaired thought processes, reduced cognitive ability, weakened memory, and increased stress."[18]

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articles/mental-health/social-media-and-mental-health.htm#:~:text=However%2
C%20multiple%20studies%20have%20found,about%20your%20life%20or%20appearance.

[12]Robinson and Smith, "The Role Social Media Plays in Mental Health."

[13]Ibid.

[14]Dovich, "Digital Media Technology and Your Spiritual Life," 2.

[15]Ibid., 6.

[16]Ibid., 6-10; See Jean Francesco A L. Gomes, "On Christian Engagement with Digital Technologies: A Reformed Perspective," *Unio Cum Christo* 7, no. 1 (2001): 43–57, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLAiREM 210530000664&site=ehost-live (accessed April 28, 2023).

[17]Ibid., 5-6.

[18]Ibid., 6; Sherry Turkle notes that multitasking also damages relationships in the household, with friends, and with romantic partners. For example, "At dinner and in the park, parents and children turn to their phones and tablets. Conversations that used to take place face-to-face migrate online" (Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*, New York: Penguin, 2015, 61-62).

The second problem is distraction. Some scholars suppose that we live in an "Age of Distraction."[19] Sherry Turkle notes that our moments of solitude that are necessary to practice Christian disciplines like meditation, prayer, Bible reading, and study have been challenged by our habit of switching on our phones and letting ourselves be unconsciously carried away by what we see on the screen.[20] Turkle further argues that in the absence of solitude, we cannot construct a concrete understanding of self: "It is only when we are alone with our thoughts—not reacting to external stimuli—that we engage that part of the brain's basic infrastructure devoted to building up a sense of our stable autobiographical past."[21] Theologian and philosopher David Wells comments that the "affliction of distraction" is the greatest challenge of this era. He asks, "How, then, can we receive from Scripture the truth God has for us if we cannot focus long enough, linger long enough, to receive that truth?"[22] A study from Harvard shows that our minds wander 47 percent of the time, and when it wanders, we are unhappy, feel anxious, and our brain is overloaded.[23] Conversely, other studies show that meditation and spending time in quietness, away from our technological gadgets, make us more socially active, reduce negative feelings, increase our level of productivity, help fight the effects of depression, and reduce stress.[24]

The data presented above clearly says that Christianity is not immune to the adverse effects of social media. Most of our existing relationships are mediated through digital technology. Technology makes it easy for us to connect with friends and family members and

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[19] Cf. Justin W. Earley, *The Common Rule: Habits of Purpose for an Age of Distraction,* Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019. Nicholas Carr comments that distractions in our lives have already been proliferating for a long time, "but have never been to a medium that, like the Net, has been programmed to so widely scatter our attention and to do it so insistently," (Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What Internet Is Doing to Our Brains,* New York: Norton, 2020, 113); also, he asserts that digital technology is enhancing our primitive reasoning while reducing our inherent ability to be more attentive thinkers (Ibid.).

[20] Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation,* 61-62. Turkle comments, "So it is not surprising that today young people become anxious if they are alone without a device. They are likely to say they are bored. From the youngest ages, they have been diverted by structured play and the shiny objects of digital culture." (Ibid.).

[21] Ibid.

[22] David L. Wells, *God in the Whirlwind: How the Holy-love of God Reorients Our World* (Nottingham: IVP, 2014) 17-18; see also Dovich, "Digital Media Technology and Your Spiritual Life," 10.

[23] Matthew Killingsworth and Daniel Gilbert, "A Wandering Mind Not a Happy Mind," *Science,* vol. 330 no. 6006, 2010, pp. 932, doi:10.1126/science.1192439 (accessed April 28, 2023).

[24] Tricia McCary Rhodes, *The Wired Soul: Finding Spiritual Balance in a Hyperconnected Age* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2016) 101; see also Dovich, "Digital Media Technology and Your Spiritual Life," 11.

make acquaintances. Distance is no longer a threat to our relationships. Because online communications are convenient, we can multitask our way through them. We do not need to give our undivided attention to anyone on the screen. Unfortunately, this kind of interaction leads nowhere. It can't make genuine relationships thrive. Media-mediated conversations are devoid of emotions. Dovich notes,

> 60 to 90% of our emotions are communicated in non-verbal ways – expressions on our face, eye contact, physical touch, inflections in our voice, body language. Written text is devoid of these emotional cues. We use emoticons and caps to try to capture some emotion, but digital engagement is an emotionally sterile structure which doesn't feed our souls.[25]

She further observes that it is not our online friends that attend our family graduation or funerals. "It is in-person relationships that share these emotional high and low points in our lives. As our neural circuits adapt to online relationships, our people skills diminish, and we lose emotional aptitudes like empathy."[26]

Despite the claims that media technology improves our sense of community and human communications, there is a growing recognition that the contrary is true over time. Moreover, the increasing number of online worship services and media-mediated ministries during and after the COVID-19 pandemic further acclimatizes the church to the disembodied form of a church community and an expanding tendency to promote an embodied faith to disembodied participants.[27] If this form of church gathering continues, it could lead to unhealthy Christian life and ineffective witness. How should the church respond to this concern? Perhaps a clear and robust biblical understanding of the church will help address the issue.

The *Ekklesia* of God

Helpful to my discussion on the need to encourage believers to in-person gatherings is to provide the basic meaning of ἐκκλησία (*ekklesia*) as used in both the OT and NT.[28] This Greek word may have multiple meanings. A Greek lexicon defines *ekklesia* as follows:

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[25]Dovich, "Digital Media Technology and Your Spiritual Life," 13.

[26]Ibid., 9.

[27]O'Lynn, "What Comes Next," 2.

[28]In the Septuagint, ἐκκλησία translates קָהָל (*qahal*), which denotes the people of God. This Hebrew word is usually translated as ἐκκλησία and sometimes συναγωγή. For example, ἐκκλησία is used in the OT for the people of God, "This is the one who was in the congregation [ἐν τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ] in the wilderness together with the angel who was

1.   A regularly summoned legislative body, an assembly;
2.   A casual gathering of people, and assemblage, gathering; and
3.   People with shared belief, community, and congregation. [29]

In the NT, it may refer to the gathering of Christians in a specific place to discuss important matters of concern to the community.[30] It may also mean the global community of the Christian church.[31] The term itself and its use in both the OT and NT presuppose not only a group of people but a group of people that gathers together. Thus, the church is an assembly of God's people gathered together in his name for worship. For example, God commanded Moses what to teach the Israelites, "*Remember* the day you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb, when

speaking to him on Mount Sinai, and who was with our fathers, and he received living oracles to pass on to you" (Acts 7:38); "I will proclaim Your name to My brethren, in the midst of the congregation [ἐκκλησίας] I will sing Your praise." [ἐκκλησίας] I will sing your praise" (Heb. 2:12, quoting Ps. 22:22); R.T. France states that ἐκκλησία "was a familiar term to a Greek-speaking Jew, being the regular LXX translation for *qahal*, the 'congregation' of the people of God," (R. T. France, *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher*, Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2004, 211); *qahal* is also used in the Old Testament to refer to the people of Israel gathered in the presence of God (Deut. 23:2–8; 1 Chr. 28:8; Mic. 2:5); see Harald Hegstad, "The Church: People Gathered in the Name of Jesus," in *The Real Church: An Ecclesiology of the Visible*, 1st ed., 14–55, (Cambridge, England: The Lutterworth Press, 2013), 16, https://www-jstor-org.gldtl.idm.oclc.org/stable/pdf/j.ctt1 cgf6hq.5.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A396a673db0e53907d9c50cae25d2992d&ab_segmen ts=&origin=&initiator= (accessed April 26, 2023).

[29]Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, and William Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 303-304.

[30]For other uses of εκκλησία referring to the gathering of God's people in a particular locality see Acts 5:11; 11:26; 14:23; 1 Cor. 11:18; Phil. 4:15; and Rev. 1:4.

[31]Cf. 1 Cor. 6:4, 12:28; Eph. 1:22, 3:10,21; 5:23-32; Col. 1:18,24; Phil. 3:6. The word ἐκκλησία is a word derived from two root words, *ek,* and *kaleo. Ek* is defined as "out of" or "from," *kaleo* means "to call" or an invitation. Together they form *ekklesia, commonly* translated from its roots as "those called out." Later on, after the time of Christ, the work *ekklesia* is used to mean "the Christian church," both local and universal, see Guy P. Duffield and Nathaniel M. Van Cleave, *Foundations of Pentecostal Theology*. Rev. ed. (Los Angles: Foursquare Media, 2008) 420; J. W. Roberts argues that the English word "church" does not come from the word *ekklesia,* although later on, it essentially assumed its meaning. He asserts that it is rather derived from the Greek adjective *kuriakos,* which means "that which is the Lord's"; for a more detailed discussion, see J W. Roberts, "The Meaning of Ekklesia in the New Testament," *Restoration Quarterly* 15, no. 1 (1972): 27–36, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx? direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0001588356&site=ehost-live (accessed April 26, 2023). Conversely, Benjamin Merkle argues that it is incorrect to say that Matthew's use of ἐκκλησία in Matt. 16:18 and 18:17 indicates a later development of the concept of the church, see Benjamin L. Merkle, "The Meaning of Ἐκκλησία in Matthew 16:18 and 18:17," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 167, no. 667 (2010): 65, https://search.ebscohost.com/login. aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0001798207&site=ehost-live (accessed April 26, 2023).

the Lord said to me, 'Assemble the people to Me, that I may let them hear My words so they may learn to fear Me all the days they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children" (Deut. 4:10). The LXX, Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, translates the word for "assemble" (קהל) with the Greek word ἐκκλησιάζω[32] "to summon an assembly," the verb that is cognate to the NT noun ἐκκλησία.[33] Edmund Clowney notes that "To worship in that assembly is to gather in God's ekklesia."[34] We must consider *ekklesia* as both the act of coming together and the group that comes together. It is to be understood as a concrete, physical assembly of the people of God gathering in his name (see Matt. 18:20). Otto Weber notes that "It is well for us then to think always of the concrete aspect of coming together and of [the] assembly when we use the word 'Community,' which we used until now and will continue to do."[35] The *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* notes that the church refers to "the visible expression of the gathered followers of Jesus Christ who have been grafted into a community created by God, under the banner of Jesus Christ, embodying in an anticipatory way the life and values of the new creation."[36]

When people gather together for a specific purpose, the action of gathering can be described empirically and sociologically. But what makes the gathering of the people of God unique from others is that their gathering is something that God himself has initiated. The apostle Paul in 1 Cor. 1:9 writes, "God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.'[37] Also, Peter in 1 Pet. 2:9, "But you are A CHOSEN PEOPLE, A royal PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR *GOD'S* OWN POSSESSION, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who has called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." It is God who leads the individual member of the

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[32]For other translations: Assemble (ASV, 1901; NIV, 2011; YLT, 1898); Gather (NKJ, 1983; RSV, 1971); Summon (NLT).

[33]Danker, Bauer, and Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature,* 304.

[34]Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church* (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1995) 31.

[35]Otto Weber, *Foundations of Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981) 531; there are physical assemblies of churches in Jerusalem, Antioch, Ephesus, Corinth, Thessalonica, Philippi, and Rome (see Acts 8:1; 13:1; 18:22; 20:17,28; 1 Cor. 1:2; 1 Thess. 1:1); also, there are assemblies gathering in houses (see 1 Cor. 11:18,20, 33; 14:26); Millard Erickson clarifies that the "individual congregation, or group of believers in a specific place, is never regarded as only a part or component of the whole church. The church is not a sum or composite of the individual local groups. Instead, the whole is found in each place," (*Christian Theology*, 3rd ed., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013, 1041).

[36]David Noel Freedman, Allen C. Myers, and Astrid B. Beck, ed. *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 2000), 252.

[37]For additional verses on being called by God to fellowship see Rom. 1:6,7; 1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Thess. 2:14.

assembly into the fellowship of his church. Also, when the church gathers together, the goal is not only to meet each other but to meet the almighty presence of God. The confidence that God makes Himself present in the gathering of his people is the reason for Christian fellowship. The church is a visible and concrete fellowship between people whom God called together to form a community.[38] Hegstad notes that the church community has two facets: "First, it is a community with God—whenever people come together in the name of Jesus, Jesus promises to be present and have fellowship with them. Second, it is [a] community with one another. The church is not a place where individuals meet with God on their own, but a place where people meet with God together as a fellowship."[39]

God's Presence in the Gathering

Often, when we read Matt. 18:20, we fail to notice an essential element regarding the church being the gathering of the people of God; God promises that he will make his presence available in their midst. Jesus said, "For where two or three have gathered together in my name, I am there in their midst." Though the context may suggest that it is about dealing with a dispute between brothers, the gathering of God's people "in my name" is what the church fellowship and worship are all about. To gather in "his name" (εἰς τὸ ἐμὸν ὄνομα) means to be one with Jesus, become part of his community, and be subject to his authority.[40] It is important to note that when Jesus gave this promise to his disciples, He was still bodily present with them during his earthly life. But this does not mean that this promise of his presence is short-term. Jesus's continued presence will be with the disciples to the end of the age.[41] God's presence among his people is the central theme of Matthew's

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[38]Hegstad, "The Church." 14-17.

[39]Harald Hegstad, "Fellowship with One Another," in *The Real Church: An Ecclesiology of the Visible*, 1st ed., (Cambridge, England: The Lutterworth Press, 2013), 97, https://www-jstor-org.gldtl.idm.oclc.org/stable/pdf/j.ctt1cgf6hq.8.pdf?refreqid= excelsior%3A396a673db0e53907d9c50cae25d2992d&ab_segments=&origin=&initiator = (accessed April 26, 2023); also in 1 John 1:3, we read, "What we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ." This verse presents one of the purposes of this letter: "that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ." The goal of the proclamation is so that others "may have fellowship with us." The Greek word *koinonia* is usually translated to English as fellowship, communion, intimacy, or participation (Acts 2:42; 1 Cor. 1:9; 10:16; Phil 1:5).

[40]Grant R. Osborne and Clinton E. Arnold, "Matthew," in *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary Series on the New Testament*, v. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010) 688.

[41]See Matt. 28:18-20.

gospel (see 1:23; 28:20).[42] He will abide with them through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, whom he will send in his name.[43] "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to *you* [italics mine]" (John 14:18). "But I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to *you* [italics mine]" (John 16:7). The promise of Jesus' continued presence through the Spirit is given to "you." The Greek word for "you" is ὑμᾶς (*humas*). It is the accusative, masculine, and plural form of the word σύ (*su*). Thus, Jesus intends to give this promise to *all* the disciples (see Gal. 4:6; 1 Cor. 3:16; 2 Cor. 6:16; 2 Tim. 1:14; 1 John 2:27). And to compare this to Matthew 18:20, we can find that there is another aspect of the presence of Christ, other than the personal indwelling of the Spirit in each of the believers that cannot be made available unless Christ's church gathers together. The text says, "For where two or three have gathered together." One person alone is not fellowship. There should be at least two persons gathering together in his name to constitute Christian fellowship. The availability of Christ's presence depends on the disciples' gathering together.

A classification of the different levels of God's presence is helpful. Most theologians recognize at least three levels of God's presence.[44] First, they note that God is present everywhere. He is "omnipresent." So even where there are no human beings, God's presence is there (see Ps. 139:7-12). The second level is God's indwelling presence in a believer by his Holy Spirit. This happens the moment the person believes in Jesus and is born again (see 1 Cor. 6:19; John 14:16-18). The third level is God residing in the midst of his people as they gather (see 1 Cor. 3:16; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:21-22).[45] God's permeating presence in creation is different from God's presence in the believer through the indwelling Spirit. It also means that his presence in individual believers is distinct when He is present in the gathering of his saints for corporate worship. John Frame notes,

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[42]Leander E. Keck, ed. "General Articles on the New Testament: The Gospel of Matthew; the Gospel of Mark." Nachdr, *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007) 379.

[43]Cf. John 14:26.

[44]According to Wayne Grudem, *"God is present in different ways in different places* [italics his], or God acts differently in different places in his creation," (*Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (England: Leicester; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1994), 379.

[45]See Ronald L. Giese Jr., "Is 'Online Church' Really Church? The Church as God's Temple," *Themelois* 45 (2020): 355, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/is-online-church-really-church-the-church-as-gods-temple/ (accessed April 28, 2023).

This language does not mean that God's power, knowledge, and freedom to act are greater in the holy places than elsewhere on earth. But we might say that in these places his presence is more intense and more intimate, and the penalties for disobedience are more severe. When God makes his dwelling in a place, that place becomes his throne.[46]

Interestingly, if this is true, we can say that believers who do not participate in a gathering of the people of God for corporate worship do not experience this kind of divine inhabitation. But how about the church gathering online? Can God's presence be mediated through digital technology, as Jesus promised in Matthew 18:20? Can believers experience the third level of God's presence alone before the screen? Believers attending online fellowships may still experience the presence of God at the second level through the indwelling Spirit but not at the third level. Based on the biblical examples of the temple imagery and the church as God's new temple in the NT, it is assumed that God's dwelling in the church is in a place (see 1 Cor 3:16, 2 Cor 6:16; Eph. 2:21).[47] There are indeed limits to what media technology can do. The following examples based on the nature of man, the incarnation of Christ, and the nature of Christian love, reveal that the church needs to pursue its physical gathering and should not settle for doing less than what is commanded and required by the Scriptures.

A.   The Nature of Man

The Triune God created man according to his image. In Gen. 2:18, God created the woman because it was not good for man *to be alone*. God is a relational God. And he made man to be a relational being. Because of that, there is a genuine, pressing, and innate desire for man to commune with other people.[48] When we look at the Bible, we learn that God's dealings with human beings occur in the context of community. In the OT, God promised Abraham that he would make him into a nation so that through him all the nations of the world will be blessed (see Gen. 12:1-3; Acts 3:25). God, through the leadership of Moses, saved the Israelite community from the iron hands of Pharaoh (see Exod. 14). This group of people afterward lived in tribes (see Exod.

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[46]John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2002), 581.

[47]Giese, "Is 'Online Church,'" 367.

[48]According to Dovich "Spiritual formation can never be relegated to a solo endeavor. Community and relationships are the very currency of spiritual growth" ("Digital Media Technology and Your Spiritual Life," 12).

28:21; Josh. 4:8). After they would be exiled to Babylon, God promised to gather them again (Mic. 2:12).

In the NT, Jesus gathered his twelve disciples (see Matt. 10:1; Mark 3:14; Luke 6:13). The disciples on the Day of Pentecost were all together in one place (cf. Acts 2:1). The early church always gathered together for fellowship (see Acts 2:42; 4:31; 14:27). And the church will be gathered together in the presence of the Lord at the Second Coming (see 1 Thess. 4:16-17). It is also important to note that the nature of this gathering in the presence of Jesus is physical. The saints will be clothed with glorified, resurrected bodies (see Job 19:25-27; Rom. 8:2-24; Phil. 3:20-21; 1 Cor. 15:51-52). If God wired human beings for a communal relationship with one another, we could say that the effective way of nurturing human relationships is through face-to-face interactions. Only meaningful conversation and genuine relationships satisfy the human heart's longing for community. As Dovich asks, "Is God's image in us slowly being extinguished as we rely more and more on technology and less on the gentle whisper of his voice wooing us to reach out and really touch each other?"[49] Many of the "one another" statements in the Bible would not make sense to us if we isolate ourselves from our community. When non-verbal communication speaks louder than words, the Scriptures command us to "Accept one another" (Rom. 15:7), "Bear one another's burdens" (Gal. 6:2), "Be patient with each other" (Eph. 4:2, NLT), "Bear with each other" (Col. 3:13, NIV), "Comfort one another" (1 Thess. 4:18), "Stimulate one another to love and good deeds" (Heb. 10:24), "encourage one another" (Heb.10:25, NLT), "Employ it [spiritual gifts] in serving one another" (1 Pet. 4:10).

Kaetler rightly observes, "Communion through bodies is God's chosen best practice for Christian witness and Christian formation."[50] Not only is in-person interaction necessary for Christian life and maturity, but it is also fundamental to the gospel message. The communication of the gospel requires embodiment. [51] The Christian message does not disqualify the importance of the body; it upholds it. We can find this truth in the teachings of Jesus and the apostles. For example, Jesus taught his disciples not to worry about food, water, and clothes (see Matt. 6:25-31). Worrying is not the solution to responding to basic human needs. Instead, Jesus emphasizes the nature of God the Father as the good and generous Provider of his children. "But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, *will he not much more clothe you?* [italics mine] . . . For the Gentiles eagerly seek

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[49]Ibid., 13.
[50]Kaetler, "Enduring Significance of the Incarnation," 101.
[51]Cf. Brad J. Kallenberg, *Following Jesus in a Technological Age* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011) 1-21.

all these things; for *your heavenly Father knows that you need all these thin*gs" [italics mine] (Matt. 6:30, 32).

Other passages are also telling us the importance of meeting our physical needs. "And my God will supply all your needs according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:19). "But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (1 Tim. 5:8).[52] The true expression of brotherly love is revealed in this passage, "But whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but indeed and truth" (1 John 3:17-18). Also, "Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal. 6:2). Bearing [53] one another's burdens is a concrete expression of love. Douglas Moo notes that the present tense of the imperatival verb βαστάζω (bear) plus the use of ἀλλήλων (one another) being fronted before the verb stress the idea of making burden bearing a natural and constant practice of the believers in the community.[54] By carrying each other's burden, the Great Commandment to love is being fulfilled (see Rom.13:8,10; Gal. 5:14). Here, the burden bearing is related to the believers' action towards an erring brother or sister (see Gal. 6:1). The action must be done in a spirit of gentleness. Thus, mutual accountability is emphasized. These expressions of Christian love and ethics are difficult, if not unthinkable, to perform in a virtual format.[55] As Guy Sayles reminds us, "Humans *are* souls, more than we *have* souls; it is not so much that we *have* bodies as that we *are* bodies. All of our experiences, whether we call them intellectual, emotional, or spiritual, are also and always *physical.*"[56] The Christian faith does not only

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[52]See also Prov. 28:27; Acts 20:34-35; Jas. 2:15-16.

[53]βαστάζω may mean "pick up," "carry," "carry away," "bear," and "remove." In all senses, there is the suggestion of burden involved; see Danker, Bauer, and Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature,* 171.

[54]Douglas J. Moo, "Galatians," *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013) 376.

[55]Dovich warns us about the danger of isolating one's self from the rest of the community and resorting to online church. She states that the church is no longer about the community but about us. We create a digital world that caters to our views and preferences. "We need to build the depth of relationship where we are comfortable confessing our 'faults to one another' (James 5:16), receiving constructive criticism (Prov. 27:17), and seeking guidance and encouragement from fellow believers" (*Digital Media Technology,* 14).

[56]Guy Sayles, "Preaching incarnation, incarnational preaching: The witness of limitation." *Review & Expositor*, 114, vol. 2 (2017): 221, https://doi.org/10.1177/0034637317702118 (accessed April 28, 2023); Giese's remarks are helpful here, "It's interesting that Christian colleges and seminaries are looking, anew, at their educational goals. For the past twenty years, schools have hopped on the bandwagon of distance education, even offering entire degrees online. Yet now discussions are taking place on

emphasize the need for souls to be nurtured spiritually but also the importance of physical presence in relating, comforting, and encouraging others. Jesus went to attend his best friend's funeral service to comfort the bereaved family and even wept for the loss of a friend (see John 11). He dined with sinners and tax collectors (see Matt. 9:10-11; Luke 15:1). He ministered to a woman at the well (see John 4:1-28), attended a wedding feast at Cana (see John 2:1-12). After his resurrection, he spent time on the road with two of his disciples, explaining to them the things that must happen to him as written in the Scriptures (see Luke 24:13-31). Indeed, the Word of God took on human flesh and dwelt among us. And because of that, his disciples saw his glory (see John 1:14), believed it, and proclaimed to the ends of the earth (see 1 John 1:1-3).

B.   The Incarnation of Christ

Jesus' incarnation, being in the flesh, was not accidental. Rather, intentional. Jesus' bodily presence is essential to his message of God's love. Divine love was manifested to the disciples and the world in the person of Jesus Christ, God's only Son (see 1 John 4:9). The apostle John understood it very well. His confidence in the proclamation of the gospel message is based on God's love revealed in Jesus. His knowledge of God's love was not theoretical. It was received and understood through experience. According to John, the embodiment of the Father's love is something that they [disciples] have heard, seen with their eyes, looked at, and their hands have touched (1 John 1:1). Christ did not simply teach the "whys" and "hows" of God's love in a theoretical level, for words are not enough to express this love (see 1 John 3:18). Rather, Jesus taught love to his disciples by living it out. He came to the place of sinners. He healed the sick, cleansed a leper (see Mark 1:41), cast out demons (see Matt. 8:16; Luke 11:14), fed the multitudes (see Matt. 14:13-21), comforted the distressed (see Matt. 9:36), and raised the dead (Matt. 9:24-25). He also ate and had fellowship with tax collectors and sinners

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whether we've gone too far: whether mentoring students in some of the upper levels of Bloom's taxonomy (levels such as creating, evaluating, or applying) should be pulled back, at least in part, to in-person dialogues . . . The only reason such a dialogue exists in our time and day is that, after over twenty years of claims that distance education can, across-the-board, be comparable in achieving learning outcomes, we are only now realizing that this is not true" (Is "Online Church,", 363); Rachael Starke, a longtime advocate of using online tools, notes, "The Christian life, in other words, can never be fully digitized. This reality is . . . prompting some seminaries to adjust their programs accordingly—not by embracing the brave new world of digitally driven collaboration and education, but by resisting it" (cited in Giese, "Is Online Church," 363).

(see Matt. 9:10-17; Mark 2:13-17), and showed compassion to the weak and discouraged (see Matt. 9:36). In other words, Jesus had direct physical contact and interactions with people. He ministered to their needs and sympathized with them.

Could he minister from a distance? I believe he can. There is an example in Luke 7:1-10 where Jesus healed the centurion's servant who was sick and about to die. He could have done most of his ministry from a distance, healed the sick, and raised the dead from heaven. He would not need to come, leave his throne in heaven, and stay in this sin-corrupted world for thirty-three years. However, Jesus chose a different way–the most demanding but effective way of serving humanity. He humbled Himself by considering himself nothing. He took the very form of a servant and died on the cross for the sins of others (see Phil. 2:1-11). Kaetler, commenting on Jesus' incarnational ministry, asserts that

> He [Jesus] does not use these ancient body-bound forms of communicating God's all-encompassing love simply because social media or the internet had not yet been invented. The Incarnation is God's chosen way of sharing the Good News in Jesus' time and our time. Embodiment is not accidental to God's love; it is essential to it. The Incarnation is enduring.[57]

According to Gaspar Colón, sympathizing and ministering to people's needs through service create and foster social attachments that keep individuals wanting to continue the contact and the fellowship.[58] But more than that, by doing so, we grow in maturity and obedience to the Lord. Since Jesus taught us the way of love, the disciples ought to love in the same manner Jesus loved. Jesus' expression of love becomes the basis and model for Christian ethics and ministry. "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? (1 John 3:16-17)." "Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another" (1 John 4:11, NIV). Based on the example of Jesus, we learn that love is incarnational. It cannot be understood and done simply in theories. Jesus loves us so much that he came and gave his life to save us from our sins.

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[57]Kaetler, "Enduring Significance," 99.

[58]Gaspar F. Colón, "Incarnational Community-Based Ministry: A Leadership Model for Community Transformation," *The Journal of Applied Christian Leadership* 6, no. 2 (Fall, 2012): 14, https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/incarnational-community-based-ministry-leadership/docview/1518931451/se-2, (accessed April 26, 2023).

In the same way, the love he has for us, being poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit (see Rom. 5:5), is enabling us to love others not simply in words but also in deeds. Also, to fully express this love, face-to-face interaction with people is inevitable. We need to imitate this, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." Thus, Jesus' incarnation was the example par excellence of the importance of both body and soul. Kaetler notes, "The church becomes the physical assembly of Jesus' followers who, as a people, continue to embody Jesus' teaching and practices of salvation, liberation, and reconciliation."[59]

C. The Nature of Christian Love

If love is a necessary element in the life of the church and a sign to the world of the abiding presence of God (see John 13:34-35), can love be mediated online? Can love be entirely and genuinely expressed without having face-to-face interaction between individuals? To answer this, we need to understand the biblical nature and expressions of love. This refers us back to God, who is Love. The Bible says God is love (see 1 John 4:8, 16). And whoever lives in love lives in God. The reason for this assertion is found in 1 John 4:19, "We love because he first loved us." Because of this great love (see 1 John 4:11), believers ought to love one another (see 1 John 3:11). Grudem understands God's love as "self-giving for the benefit of others."[60] A Bible dictionary defines love as "An inner quality expressed outwardly and a commitment to seek the well-being of the other through concrete acts of service. Love is a central biblical concept for defining the relationship between God and humans."[61] Love can also be expressed through the bond between parent and child[62] and mutual devotion and commitment expressed in a close friendship such as between Jonathan and David (see 1 Sam. 18:1-4; 20:17; 2 Sam. 1:26).[63] The greatest expression of love is seen in Jesus' willing and sacrificial death on the cross (see 1 John 3:16; 4:10). In light of that sacrifice, believers are commanded to express their love for one another not only "with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth" (1 John 3:18). Believers show their love for God and their fellow believers by concrete acts of willing and joyful service for the benefit of others. Serving others for their joy and faith is a definite picture of love (see 2 Cor. 1:24; Phil. 1:25; 2:4).

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[59]Kaetler, "Enduring Significance," 101.
[60]Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 198.
[61]Freedman, Myers, and Beck, *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible,* 825.
[62]Ibid.
[63]Parental love always seeks the well-being of the child. This love may also be expressed in the form of physical discipline (Prov. 3:11-12; 13:24; Heb. 12:6).

But how about the online church? Dovich notes, "It is about us, not [the] community. Online we choose friends, and news sources, and create playlists that fit our worldview and our preferences. If someone disagrees with us, we hide, block, unfollow, unfriend, and delete. We create a digital world that caters to our views and preferences."[64] She added,

> Digital engagement can augment interpersonal connections but its sterile structure is dangerous to the well-being of our soul. Human relations are difficult and messy, and the internet makes it easy to hide from this. We need to develop the discipline of presence, freed from the tedium of incessant interruption, to experience the power and beauty in relationships, [and] to honor and attend to the people around us.[65]

On the other hand, being with other Christians, there is an endless opportunity to practice the "one another" commands in Scripture and therefore become nurtured in these virtues. "Accept one another, just as Christ also accepted [you]" (Rom. 15:7). "Admonish one another" (Rom. 15:14). "Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other" (Eph. 4:32). "Bear with each other and forgive one another" (Col. 3:13, NIV). "Live in peace with one another" 1 (Thess. 5:13). "Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another" (Jas. 5:16). These qualities are essential in living a life worthy of the Lord and of our calling (see Eph. 4:1; Col. 1:10). The apostle Paul used the technology available during his time to express his love and deep concerns for the churches. But he recognized that writing was no replacement for a face-to-face interaction with his fellow brothers and sisters in the Lord: "For I long to see you so that I may impart some spiritual gift to you, that you may be established; that is, that I may be encouraged together with you *while* among you, each of us by the other's faith, both yours and mine" (Rom. 1:11-12). The same desire the writer of 2 and 3 John had when he wrote, "Though I have many things to write to you, I do not want to do so with paper and ink; but I hope to come to you and speak face to face, so that your joy may be made full" (2 John 12). "I had many things to write to you, but I am not willing to write them to you with pen and ink; but I

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[64]Dovich, "Digital Media Technology," 14. The growth of online churches is challenging the notion of "church" the *ekklesia* of God, as a physical gathering of persons, in a particular space. Thus, it is not surprising that for Graham Ward, for example, the opportunity of a computer-generated community represents a lamentable shift towards a less embodied Christian community (Graham Ward, *Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice,* Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005, 110).

[65]Ibid.

hope to see you shortly, and we will speak face to face" (3 John 13-14). These biblical writers understood that there were graces that ink and paper could not carry.[66] Can there be any other way to practice the "one another" commands besides being in person with other believers? Kaetler asserts, "Communication through bodies is God's chosen and best practice for Christian witness and Christian formation."[67] Also, Jay Kim, in his book *Analog Church*, observes that "Digital technology affords us brand new opportunities to share the gospel, as well as encourage and challenge one another." However, he strongly argues,

> Transformation in the life of a church is always an analog experience, as we journey shoulder to shoulder with other people, gathering in real ways as real people, to invite God to change us individually and collectively. We experience this transformation in a variety of ways . . . but all of these ways are in some form or fashion, tangible and physical.[68]

Exegetical Analysis of Hebrews 10:24-25

Hebrews 10:24-25

And let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.

Having urged the community to faith (Heb.10:22) and hope (10:23), the writer of the book of Hebrews encourages the community, *let us*[69] *consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds* (Heb. 10:24), implying that the community cannot hold on to their confession alone.[70] F. F. Bruce notes that believers will be more inclined to confess their hope boldly and wholeheartedly if they are present to encourage other believers in the community. "Christian faith and witness flourish

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[66]Marshall Segal, "Why Don't We Have Good Friends?" *DesiringGod,* November 7, 2022, https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/why-dont-we-have-good-friends?fbclid=Iw AR3c5zNTbZn7vU67R0b-v1QGXxYk1C7j0tfwa1Uv0Kqo3iHy3GxIjE5oab0, (accessed May 2, 2023).

[67]Kaetler, "Enduring Significance," 101.

[68]Jay Y. Kim, *Analog Church: Why We Need Real People, Places, and Things in the Digital Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2020) 96; see Giese, "Is 'Online Church,'" 352.

[69]Appearances of "Let us" in Hebrews: Heb 4:1,11,14,16; 6:1; 10:22,23,24; 12:1,28; 13:13,15.

[70]James Thompson, *Hebrews*: *Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008) 205.

the more vigorously in an atmosphere of Christian fellowship."[71] To *"consider how to stimulate one another" is* vital to the community since there is a great danger of losing their commitment and thus moving away from the community. As a result, it may bring discouragement to others. The same appeal is given in Heb. 3:12-13, "Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is *still* called 'Today,' so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin." David Allen states, "Both here and throughout the epistle (4:1, 11; 10:24–25; 12:15–16; 13:1–3), the author challenged the community of readers to devote themselves to watching out for each other."[72] The purpose of the encouragement is to keep one another from having an unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God (cf. Heb. 4:1,11; 6:11). Because of the hardening of the heart caused by the deceitfulness of sin, believers are to look after one another and become accountable to one another. Believers are to see to it (NIV, 2011), to be careful (NLT, 1996), watch out (CEB, 2011), and take care (ESV, 2008) that none of them will have an unbelieving heart. Hence, the need for community is emphasized. Leon Morris sees a strong connection between having a vibrant Christian fellowship and resisting the tendency of apostasy that was prevalent at that time.[73] Thompson recognizes the community aspect of 3:13:

> Only by corporate solidarity will the church maintain its faithfulness. Indeed, the author is concerned not only that the community not fall away but also that unfaithfulness not be present in any one of you [Emphasis in the original] (3:12b). The author repeats this focus on "any" later in this homily (cf. 12:15–16), indicating his concern for the solidarity of the whole community. Thus it can retain its fidelity as members encourage one another each day [Emphasis in the original] (3:13).[74]

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[71]F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle of the Hebrews: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes: The New International Commentary on the New Testament* 14 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981) 252-253.

[72]David Allen, *Hebrews: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture.* Vol. 35 of *The New American Commentary* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2010), 263.

[73]Leon Morris in Frank Ely Gaebelein, ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Hebrews - Revelation*, vol. 12 (London: Pickering & Inglis 1981, 34).

[74]Thomson, *Hebrews,* 93.

Moreover, the verb "Let us consider" is from the verb κατανοῶμεν (*katanoōmen*).[75] It may mean to notice, observe, look at reflectively, consider, contemplate, perceive, think about carefully and attentively.[76] The present tense of the verb calls for continual consideration of how believers should give careful attention to one another for the purpose of provoking one another to love and good deeds. Notice the Greek word order in the sentence "καὶ κατανοῶμεν ἀλλήλους εἰς παροξυσμὸν ἀγάπης καὶ καλῶν ἔργων." The main verb is *katanoōmen*, and it is immediately followed by ἀλλήλους (*allēlous*) "one another,"[77] which is the direct object of the verb. It is significant because the emphasis for the verb "consider" is placed not on the Christian mutual responsibility to provoke others to love and good deeds even though that is important but on *one another*.[78] They are to consider what? Consider one another. They are to give careful attention to one another, focus on one another, study one another, and be concerned with one another. To do so, they need to be with one another to take time to understand one another. This cannot happen in isolation. Learning each other's weaknesses and struggles does not happen overnight. It takes time, energy, involvement, and commitment. This may be why the writer of the Book of Hebrews exhorts, *do not neglect our meeting together*, for we need one other. The goal of the command is to focus on one another and think of ways to stimulate or provoke one another to love and good deeds. Perhaps, it is also important to note that the verb "consider" (*katanoeō*) is used only twice in Hebrews. The other account is in 3:1, "Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of a heavenly calling, *consider Jesus* [emphasis mine], the Apostle and High Priest of our confession." Perhaps, *katanoeō* links the two verses 3:11 and 10:24, to the idea that Jesus and his community are inseparable. No one remains faithful to Jesus and concomitantly abandons his community. Instead, the one who is faithful to Jesus considers the others within the community for the purpose of provoking them to love and good deeds (see John 13:34-35).

The word for "stimulate" or "provoke" is παροξυσμὸν (*paraxusmon*). Orton Wiley finds *paraxusmon* as an intensely potent word.[79] Other Bible translations render it "spur" (NET, 2005; NIV, 2011), "encourage" (NLT, 1996), "provoke" (NRSV, 1989), and "Stir

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[75]κατανοῶμεν is the 1st pl. pres. act. subj. of κατανοέω. The present is progressive. Cf. Harris, *Hebrews*, 276. Perhaps the best rendering of Heb. 10:24 comes from the NKJV (1983), "And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works."

[76]Danker, Bauer, and Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature,* 522.

[77]Interestingly, this is the only place where this word is used in Hebrews.

[78]Harris, *Hebrews,* 277.

[79]Orton H. Wiley and Morris A. Weigelt, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Rev. ed. (Kansas City, Mo: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1984) 304.

up" (ESV, 2008). It can also mean "rousing to activity" or "a state of irritation expressed in argument, sharp disagreement."[80] The only other use of this verb is found in Acts 15:39, where Luke refers to the intense disagreement between Paul and Barnabas. The context, however, suggests something positive.[81] Bruce notes, "But here love is provoked in the sense of being stimulated in the lives of Christians by the considerateness and example of other members of their fellowship."[82] Morris notes that "this kind of love is thus a product of community activity, for it is a virtue that requires others for its exercise."[83] So, how can we provoke other believers to love and good deeds? In Heb. 10:25, the writer gives two ways to do this task by providing us with contrasting expressions that mark out what the believers must not and must do.

Do not Forsake the Assembly

First, what they must not do is *forsake their own assembling together.* The particle ἐγκαταλείποντες (*egkataleipontes*)[84] carries the idea of "abandoning" (NET, 2005), "neglecting" (ESV, 2008), and "giving up" (NIV, 1985) someone or something. The particle negated by μὴ (*mē*) indicates means. And the particle in the present tense may be customary or habitual.[85] Thus, the phrase "as is the habit of some."

Interestingly, the same word is used when Jesus was on the cross crying before the Father, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46, NIV, 1985).[86] It is also used once more in Hebrews 13:5 where the Lord states "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you" (NIV, 1985; see Deut. 31:6, 8; Josh. 1:5). Even though we forsake God, he will not forsake us (see 2 Tim. 2:13). Apparently, there were members who were leaving their community. They may have been discouraged by their severe trials and suffering. In Heb. 10:32-34, many were experiencing persecution; some were imprisoned, others had their property confiscated, and others were abandoned by their family members because of their faith in Jesus.[87] These believers were facing a spiritual predicament. From a human perspective, we may say that they

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[80]Danker, Bauer, and Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature,* 780.

[81]Harris, *Hebrews,* 277.

[82]Bruce, *The Epistle of the Hebrews,* 253.

[83]Morris in Gaebelein, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 105.

[84]ἐγκαταλείποντες is the nom. pl. masc. of the pres. act. ptc. of ἐγκαταλείπω (*egkataleipo*).

[85]Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 521-522.

[86]The apostle Paul also uses ἐγκαταλείπω (*egkataleipo*) of Demas and others who abandoned him (cf. 2 Tim. 4:10,16).

[87]See Thomson, *Hebrews*, 206.

had a good reason for neglecting and forsaking their Christian assembly. However, Guthrie notes, "Whatever the reason, the author sees their discontinuance of common fellowship and worship as fatal for perseverance in the faith. Encouragement cannot take place in isolation. Thus, what they must do is gather for mutual encouragement."[88] Wiley also sees the need for public assemblies if Christians are to incite others to love and good deeds. He notes, "Corporate worship is a necessity in the Christian life, and fellowship with one another has been regarded as one of the chief means of grace."[89] DeSilva asserts that abandoning the assembly does not only hurt the person leaving but discourages those who stay.[90] This attitude and response to crises contradict the command, "Consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds." Christians shouldn't only think of themselves but also about others. If their actions hurt the faith of their fellow believers and their community, that's a sign that they are no longer walking in love. And thus, living contrary to the will of God.

The word for "assembling" is taken from the Greek word ἐπισυναγωγή (*episunagoge*). It is a compound word derived from ἐπι (*epi*), meaning upon or unto plus συνάγω (*sunagō*), to cause to come together. Combining the two words may imply a gathering of a group of people at some place or the gathered group.[91] The former is reflected by translating the verb as infinitive (e.g., to meet together (ESV, 2008)), and the latter is reflected with a noun (e.g., meeting (NIV, 1985)). Perhaps the verb ἐπισυνάγω (*episunagō*) can give us a more vivid picture of what it means to gather together. It depicts how the hen gathers her chicks under her wings (see Matt. 23:37; Mark 13:27; Luke 17:37).

Many scholars link ἐπισυναγωγή to συναγωγή (*synagoge*). [92] However, William Gouge asserts the concept of ἐπι as denoting emphasis. He notes that συναγωγή was a gathering together, and ἐπισυναγωγή was "to gather together unto a place."[93] Moreover, Stephen Atnip argues that these two are not equally the same. [94] For Atnip,

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[88]George H. Guthrie, *Hebrews*: *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998) 345.

[89]Wiley, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 305.

[90]David Arthur DeSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000) 343.

[91]See Danker, Bauer, and Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature,* 382.

[92]See Harris, *Hebrews,* 277.

[93]William Gouge, *A Commentary on the Whole Epistle to the Hebrews*, vol. 1 of *Nichol's Series of Commentaries* (London: J. Nisbet & Co., 1866) 355.

[94]Stephen C. Atnip, "'ΕΠΙΣΥΝΑΓΟΓΗ' as Christian Community" (PhD diss., Amridge University, 2021), 226-231, https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-

ἐπισυναγωγή is more than a sabbath gathering. It is more than a Sunday worship service. It is a communal and eschatological Christian community.[95] The other occurrence of ἐπισυναγωγή in the NT is found in 2 Thess. 2:1, "Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together (ἐπισυναγωγῆς) to him." Many scholars believe that this use of the word by the writer of Hebrews was intentional.[96] He may be referring to the eschatological gathering of God's people in 2 Macc. 2:7 RSV, "until God gathers (ἐπισυναγωγὴν) his people together again and shows his mercy." Moreover, it is also important to note that almost all of the appearances of ἐπισυνάγω (*episunagō*) in the NT (see Matt. 23:37; Mark 13:27; Luke 17:37) are similarly used with eschatological implications.[97] Christians should look to the future, fixing our eyes on Jesus as we await his return. The closer we get to that day (Christ's coming),[98] the more active we should be in meeting together to spur one another on to love and good deeds.[99] We gather here now because we will gather together there in the future. Our gathering as a church should manifest a foretaste of the kind of gathering God's people will have on the Lord's return. It will not be an abstract, disembodied, nonspatial gathering (see 1 Cor. 15:52; Phil. 3:20-21; 1 Thess. 4:16-17). It will be a physical, embodied, spatial, and glorious gathering of God's people before his presence. All who have believed in Christ will receive from the Lord a resurrected body (see Phil. 3:20-21). Conversely, Thomson recognizes that the abandonment of the assembly may lead to apostasy (see Heb. 2:1-4; 3:12; 6:4-6).[100] He may be correct to see this connection. Without the support, care, and encouragement coming from other believers, we are very prone to succumb to the evil devices of the enemy that might lead to apostasy.

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theses/ἐπισυναγωγή-as-christian-community/docview/2642402312/se-2 (accessed April 28, 2023).

[95]Atnip, "ΕΠΙΣΥΝΑΓΟΓΗ as Christian Community," 230-232.

[96]Thomson, *Hebrews,* 206.

[97]See Thomson, *Hebrews*, 207, and Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews,* 528.

[98]The phrase "the day" may refer to "the day of judgment" (Matt. 25:13; Luke 21:34; Rom. 2:5; 1 Cor. 3:13) or "the day of the Lord" (1 Cor. 1:8; 2 Cor. 1:14; Phil. 1:6; 1 Thess. 5:2; 2 Pet. 3:10).

[99]Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, New Testament *Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1985), 291; cf. William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9 – 13*, ed., David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker. *Nachdr, Word Biblical Commentary*, Vol. 47, B (Nashville: Nelson, 2008), 290.

[100]Thomson, *Hebrews,* 206; cf. Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text: The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids MI.: Carlisle [England]: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1993), 527.

Encourage One Another

Second, what believers must do is to *encourage one another.* The word used for "encourage" is παρακαλέω (*parakaleō*). In the NT, *parakaleō* denotes the idea of one person standing alongside another, giving appropriate counsel, comfort, and help.[101] Παρακαλέω can also indicate urgent insistence (also in Heb. 3:13)[102] in view of the day of the Lord. The present tense of the verb may carry the idea that encouraging one another should not only be limited to Sunday worship gatherings but must take place daily. Why is it necessary that Christians should encourage one another? The purpose is to protect one another from the deceitfulness of sin (see Heb. 3:13). The whole community must assume responsibility to watch that no one grows weary or falls away (see Heb. 6:6). Left to our own devices, we would probably grow weak and exhausted and eventually fall away. Our human tendency is prone to discouragement, and we easily give up. If the devil is looking for Christians to devour (see 1 Pet. 5:8), we should ensure that the enemy will not triumph in his attempts to destroy us. Thus, the necessity of having a community where believers encourage, rebuke, and protect one another is emphasized. Lastly, I want to stress the importance of this phrase, "and *all the more* as you see the day drawing near (καὶ τοσούτῳ μᾶλλον ὅσῳ βλέπετε ἐγγίζουσαν τὴν ἡμέραν).[103] The combination of τοσούτῳ (*tosoutō*), an adjective, and μᾶλλον (*mallon*), an adverb in the phrase, is marked for emphasis. There are only four other occurrences in Hebrews where τοσοῦτος is used (see Heb. 1:4; 4:7; 7:22; 12:1). But in this verse 10:25, it is combined with another comparative particle μᾶλλον, something the author did not use before, nor he did after. Ellingworth notes that the force of τοσοῦτος is ascensive,[104] stressing the necessity for mutual encouragement for believers in view of the pressing and difficult situations the Christian community is going through (see Heb. 10:34; 13:3).[105] This suggests that when persecution and trials come, Christians should not abandon their community; instead, they should *all the more* look for opportunities for meeting together to provoke one another to love and good deeds. This reminds us of the warning of Jesus in Matthew 24:12-13 NIV, "Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but he who stands firm to the end will be

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[101]Danker, Bauer, and Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature,* 764-765.

[102]Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews,* 529.

[103]See Danker, Bauer, and Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature,* 764-765.

[104]Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews,* 529.

[105]See Thomson, *Hebrews*, 207 and Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews,* 528.

saved." [106] Believers need each other. Every Christian needs a community where they will be encouraged to persevere in their faith and grow in their love for one another (see John 13:34-35).

Conclusion

There is much more to discuss about the importance of the church meeting together. But for now, let me conclude with the following important remarks on why believers should not forsake their physical gathering together as a community.

First, believers must gather together because media technology is incapable of nurturing and sustaining genuine human relationships. Praise God for technology! Media technology has been helpful in so many ways and it has become the epitome of human ingenuity. However, it also has an intrinsic and powerful ethos that can ruin our ability to enjoy healthy and deeply satisfying interpersonal relationships. Hence, the overwhelming infiltration and expansion of media technology into our world, particularly in the church, are compelling us to reexamine the quality of our interpersonal relationships, the intimacy and harmony of our faith community, and the effectiveness of our witness to the world. It is unfortunate that despite the tidal wave of having unlimited ways to connect and communicate with other people, one study shows that many of us are losing real friends. The majority cannot even name a friend for each of their fingers.[107] This only means that many of us are getting lonelier. When virtual meetings are becoming the norm in today's culture, we should remind ourselves that humans are not disembodied souls. Therefore, the best and most effective way of communication is achieved through face-to-face interaction. Should we let technology control our activities and limit the manifold expressions of our love? God forbid that this should be the case.

Second, believers must gather together because that is what the church is. We are a community where God's Spirit dwells. We are designed and called for fellowship. Our experience and intrinsic longing testify that it is not good for a man to be alone. We need others for survival and growth. Should we settle for virtual meetings? *No.* Due to the deceitfulness of sin, believers are commanded not to give up their gathering together for mutual encouragement and support "to stimulate one another to love and good deeds." Alone, we are weak. But together, we can be strong. As a proverb says, "Two are better than one . . . A cord of three strands is not quickly broken,"[108] so individuals in the church

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[106]NIV, 1985.
[107]Segal, "Why Don't We Have Good Friends?"
[108]Ecclesiastes 4:9,12, NIV (1985).

need each other for encouragement. As adversity and persecution arise, in view of the future, we should gather all the more as the day of the Lord approaches. The Lord promises not to leave us nor forsake us. May it be the same commitment we give to our fellow believers. Let us not forsake our assembling together lest we fall; instead, let us be devoted to one another (see Rom. 12:10). Every time believers gather in *his name*; it gives us a foretaste of the coming kingdom. The Christian community may have many weaknesses and deficiencies; nonetheless, this is the church Christ redeemed with his blood. He died for her so that he could cleanse her and prepare her for his return.

Third, believers must gather together because love is best expressed in person. God's love came to us in the person of Christ. He is the embodiment and exact expression of God's love. In other words, love is tangible. It is something that can be seen, touched, and experienced. Jesus loves sinners. That's why he came, ate, and walked with sinners. He came to die for sinners. Thus, we should not ignore the importance of the body. Our physical presence as a church serves as salt and light to this world (see Matt. 5:13-16). According to Jesus, we can shine our light best in darkness through our good deeds (see Matt. 5:16). Good deeds require embodiment.

Lastly, it might also benefit us if we ask ourselves why an increasing number of believers prefer to attend an online church than join an in-person fellowship. What are we missing? Do we care enough to look for answers to this problem? If we genuinely love enough and consider others' interests more than our own, we should quickly look for ways to address this problem. It could be a good topic for another research venture. I hope that through this paper, the church will be encouraged to love one another more deeply and sincerely and pursue our fellowship together as we look forward to the coming of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

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