

The Church in Cyberspace

Going where no church has gone before?

Given its decline in our generation, worldly cynics might observe that the modern church needs ‘all the help it can get’. Along with liberals in the church itself, they might then be incredulous to learn that many Christians view the attempt to ‘be church’ and ‘do worship’ in cyberspace, as just another doomed attempt aimed at turning the tide of spiritual decay. The truth is, however, quite different. What the church needs is God’s help *to obey God’s agenda for it* – no more, no less. And what that would mean is a recovery of the biblical understanding of what it means to be church in the first place.

The worldwide web certainly has a place in supporting the general work of the Christian church. But when it comes to setting up a virtual church community in cyberspace, as part of the latest communications revolution, then the surfer can no more be a member of a legitimate ‘church’, than could a reader via the printing press.

Where no church has gone before

In the spring of 2004 the first two web-based church worship services went public in the UK. They were the Church of England’s ‘I-Church’, based in the Oxford Diocese, and the Methodist sponsored ‘Church of Fools’, a project of the ‘Ship of Fools’ online Christian magazine. Those behind these two media events admit ‘uncertainty’ as pioneers in their new enterprises. The Church of Fools website even states that it chose its title to be seen to be ‘poking fun’ at itself. Now as anyone who knows me will testify, I am not averse to utilizing humour to make a point myself. But I would find it difficult to garner from Scripture a mandate for a church of Christ to ridicule itself and refuse to take seriously its role as a worshipping community.

The Church of Fools founders state that it is not their intention to overthrow ‘real’ church. But equally they make it clear that they do believe ‘the net offers people the chance for genuine meetings and true community’, that the cyber church can, prospectively, legitimately take its place alongside the ‘real’ church. And this begs two very different and key questions. Is a ‘community’ in cyberspace a legitimate extension of the corporate body of Christ on earth? Or is it rather yet further proof that many modern Christians have no biblical understanding of what it means to be ‘church’ at all. In addition, it is perhaps noteworthy that these same two innovative online ‘churches’ were sponsored by two of the fastest declining denominations in the UK¹ – denominations actively searching for ‘new ideas’ to stem the deterioration.

Fools for Christ – or a church of fools?

The title ‘Church of Fools’² is no doubt a self-deprecating allusion to the apostle Paul’s ‘fools for Christ’ reference at 1 Corinthians 4:10. In that passage the great apostle speaks of the need to become ‘fools for Christ’. The context of his argument is that the world views the beliefs and practices of the Christian church as ‘foolishness’. What the passage does not suggest, however, is that Christians should be ‘fools’ in any other sense. What then are we to make of Christians who believe it is perfectly possible to hold ‘genuine meetings’ and experience ‘true community’ via screens and wires?

Now let me be clear what I am NOT saying here. I am *not* saying that the Internet is no place for the modern church in the broader *non-worshipping* sense – far from it. I have long been an advocate of Christians and the church getting involved in every aspect of Internet communication, when it comes to the furtherance of the gospel and Christian teaching. Where

the Christian message is systematically being stifled in the liberal-dominated media world – and increasingly in the world of print publishing – the web presents the church with a veritable cyberspace *Areopagus*, an unfettered voice in the free marketplace of ideas. Indeed, we would be right to welcome the freedom the Internet provides for the proclamation of the gospel by echoing the sentiments of Samuel Morse who, sending the very first electric telegraph, tapped out joyously: ‘What hath God wrought!’ (Numbers 23:23).

But, while the presence of Christian evangelism, support information and all manner of other church Net support is fine, there can be no alternative to the reality of sharing and worshipping in a common understanding of the faith in a local community. The fact that some modern church leaders have come to believe it is possible to do so, that cyberchurch or cyber worship in virtual ‘communion’ with a rag bag of unknown individuals (who may well hold no catholic truths in common at all!), dispensing entirely with the sacrament of ‘breaking bread’ at a common table³, provides yet a further cause for spiritual concern in the modern church. How ‘on earth’, we should want to know, is the church eldership to maintain the sanctity and health of common church life, including the pastoring and disciplining of the flock? Perhaps by a Star Trek-like ‘beaming’ here and there to various far-flung locations? All this brings into sharp focus the God-given, apostolic teaching and biblical mandate that defines what it means to be church.

When is a church ‘a church’?

There is no way here in this short article that I can do full justice to what it means to be ‘church’ in every age until Christ returns. But it is clear, not least through the setting up of these two virtual cyber communities as ‘true churches’, that increasing numbers of Christians are today so biblically uninformed that they no longer know what it means to be church at all.

To begin with, the three Bible-authorizing elements that make a church ‘a church’ in God’s (not man’s) sight are: the faithful preaching of the Word (John 8:31,47; Gal.1:8-9; 2 Thess.2:15; 2 Tim.3:16-4:4; 1 John 4:1-3); the right administration of the sacraments (1 Cor. 10:14-17,21; 1 Cor. 11:23-30); and the exercise of church discipline, as required by the first two (Matt.18:17; Acts 20:28-31; Rom. 16:17-18; 1 Cor. 5:1-13). It does not take long to work out that the first of these three has already become the victim of modern church practice in churches generally (and is the *real* root of *all* our church woes today!), never mind on the web. The great sadness of our generation is that Bible-believing Christians are finding faithful churches increasingly hard to find. And though the preaching of the Word can occur online, the Bible makes it clear that that preaching ought primarily to be within the context of community church life, not apart from it. But the other two elements, sacrament observance and the pastoring and disciplining of the flock, are simply impossible to administer there. It should be plain to the thinking Christian that God himself has instituted the universal (catholic) Christian faith and deems communal catholicity within local communities the best expression of that faith.

The truth is (and our generation has been particularly guilty of this) many churches, including evangelical churches, have come to view the Lord’s Supper as entirely superfluous to true church worship. And yet, at 1 Corinthians 11, Paul is at pains to point out that those who abuse the Supper may well fall ill – with some even dying (vs.30). Such is the importance of it at the heart of all church life! And the prospect of administering church discipline, the natural and necessary corollary of safeguarding the sanctity and health of the church community – which goes hand in hand with attendance at the Lord’s Table – becomes a total non-starter in cyberspace.

Back on Planet Earth

Though the Christian church has many things to offer and teach the world as well as individual Christians via the worldwide web, the reality of meaningful church membership,

and thereby genuine community church worship, is not one of them. If we are to rediscover precisely what it means to be church, then we ought to humbly admit that God actively seeks those who desire to worship him in 'spirit and truth' (John 4:23,24). Sincerity *alone* in church and worship is not enough. 'What is truth?' asked Pilate. 'Your Word is truth,' says Jesus. Thus, Christ teaches that *all* worship (and worship *is* the heart of all church life) is defined biblically, not by the whims of men's perhaps sincere, but ultimately futile, agenda.

If we are to be restored to a more fruitful relationship with God, what the modern church must understand is that culture generally has forgotten the concept of meaningful community and the modern church is following suit. We can only exacerbate the situation if we settle for a virtual reality, customized version of church 'down a tube'. One key element of Christian witness (and perhaps the only one many express at all) is the absurd and puzzling practice (as our neighbours, friends and families see it) of getting up Sunday by Sunday and joining with other believers in a joint and highly public act of community witness for Christ. If we routinely exempt ourselves from that weekly Sabbath act, preferring to pursue individual, isolated 'communion'⁴ with a geographically dispersed and de-personalized 'church', we shall quickly find ourselves in the area of offering God presumptuous, profane (unauthorized) and, ultimately, unacceptable worship. God has made known his 'non-negotiables' that mark a church as a true church. For, when all is said and done, 'a church' is what God says it is, not what we conceive it to be.

So if we are considering the option of joining the cyberchurch revolution, we must ask ourselves: do we want to be members of a virtual reality church powered courtesy of the electricity companies; or a true church, authorized and empowered by Christ?

Peter C Glover is author of 'The Virtual Church: And How to Avoid It – The Crisis of Deformation and the Need for Re-formation in the 21st Century Church', Xulon Press, ISBN 1 - 594673-98-5. The book is available through all normal retail outlets, or online from Amazon.co.uk or through the author's www.word21.com website.

¹ As I have written elsewhere, one of the Anglican church's own internal reports has described the Church of England as 'in meltdown' while the Methodist Church (I happen to live in a one converted Methodist Chapel and my local Presbyterian church now lodges in another) has been in terminal decay for many years.

² Linked, as it is, with the often (in other more positive ways) humorous online 'Ship of Fools' website.

³ See Acts 2:42, which sets out the essential elements for all main Sabbath church meetings.

⁴ Such an oxymoron speaks volumes! Divinely acceptable worship requires a very real congregation meeting in one physical location (Acts 2:44; 1 Cor. 11:18,20a).