

**COVID-19 and the Paradigm Shift in
how Christians Understand 'Gathering'**

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Summary

This thesis is firmly rooted in practical theology relating to the specific context of COVID-19 we find ourselves in today. It aims to examine what it means for the church to 'gather' in light of restrictions in place due to social distancing. Specifically, it aims to resolve any uncertainty or ambiguity around alternative forms of online church and their validity. Some churches continue to gather in person despite gathering restrictions and lockdowns under the notion that we are commanded to do so and are commanded to obey God over any human laws. Furthermore, some argue that there is perhaps a special supernatural blessing or extra presence of Jesus present when we are physically gather. This essay dismantles the argument in favour of gathering despite lockdown restrictions and argues for the validity of online church and alternative forms of gathering. It draws upon biblical exegesis and leans on far greater theologians that have come before.

It is my hope that the coalescence of ideas contained in this thesis can contribute to the discussions and decision making that church leadership around the world has been forced into due to COVID-19. I hope it is able to serve as a gentle rebuke to those who stubbornly open their doors in the midst of worsening cases, and as an encouragement to those who long to gather together again, and for now are exploring innovative creative substitutions to what was once their normal church services. As we all face the paradigm shift of 'a new normal,' it is my hope that we are able to rise to the occasion, lovingly discerning what to do and having the strength to make decisions rooted in self sacrifice.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.



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Foreword and Acknowledgements

To begin, I would like to thank the numerous people that have supported me in undertaking the task of not just writing this thesis, but the entire journey of completing my Masters of Theological Studies. I am hugely grateful to all the staff at the Adelaide College of Divinity and at Newlife College that have helped me reach this point.

In particular, I would like to thank my thesis supervisors, both Tanya Wittwer and Christy Capper for their regular encouragement and help with writing this thesis.

I would also like to thank my wife Natarsha Whiteway for her constant support, encouragement, and help in discussing and engaging with ideas, and being my partner as I journey through theological academia.

This thesis, as gleaned from the title, is an examination of the effects of COVID-19 on church and how it has affected our ability to gather, and was researched and written throughout 2020 and 2021. Therefore, not only is this essay written in real time - that is, with no distance between the event and the paper, but it was also a lived experience. Throughout this time I worked as a pastor at a church and grappled with the very real questions of what COVID-19, restrictions, lockdowns, and the threat of a health crisis meant for church and how we met. As pastors, we had to make calls regarding opening and closing the church without the luxury of time and consideration that this paper has had.

It should be noted upfront that while this thesis ruminates on the effects of COVID-19 on the praxis of ecclesiology, it is not an ecclesiological thesis, but rather one firmly rooted in practical theology. I should personally note that across my subject load before writing my dissertation I did not have the opportunity to delve deeply into ecclesiology and as such, I was interested in gaining an understanding of the field through work in my thesis. However, this thesis is first and foremost concerned with the current context of COVID-19 and how biblical witness can inform us as we navigate this new context.

This lived experience has had two key impacts on this essay. Firstly, many of the resources drawn upon are ones that have been made available in real time. Due to the ongoing and changing nature of the pandemic, many of the most readily available resources from pastors and theologians have been 'blog posts' rather than published books. Secondly, many people's thoughts, mine included, have evolved and changed in real time. Some thoughts from earlier in 2020 may not be as relevant in 2021, and who but God knows what 2022 and beyond will bring as this pandemic continues to evolve?

Introduction

COVID-19, commonly called the coronavirus, is a disease that began a worldwide pandemic in December 2019. While it originally had its origins in Wuhan, China, it has since spread worldwide with many confirmed cases, and sadly, many deaths due to the virus. It is an understatement to say that the COVID-19 pandemic has changed everyday life, and that it has forced us into a 'new normal'.

As of the time of writing, there is no cure for COVID-19, and many efforts worldwide have been focused on prevention. Alongside the push for a vaccine and expediency in its rollout, the major preventative countermeasures have been oriented around the idea of 'social distancing.' Many cities have been facing repeated lockdowns. People are being told, and in some places the law is mandating, that they are not to go out unless it is for an essential reason. If a business can operate online, or if workers can work from home, they are encouraged (or forced) to do so. Many businesses and social spaces that were once a luxury taken for granted, such as restaurants and cinemas, are being restricted and closed in order to avoid large groups of people congregating and potentially spreading the virus. Large gatherings such as weddings and funerals have had laws put in place to restrict the number of people allowed to gather, often with the rules changing with little to no notice, throwing important milestone events in people's lives into chaos.

In short, everyday life has been changing in a way that discourages people from gathering together, which raises immediate and obvious questions about the church, how we gather, and how we respond to this crisis. After all, traditionally the church

has met together physically every Sunday, but such gatherings are now either banned, restricted, or medically unwise in many parts of the world due to their potential to contribute to the spread of COVID-19.

It is therefore not an understatement to posit that COVID-19 and the resulting effects of this virus on society has also had a significant effect on the church - and arguably, the church is facing a paradigm shift in its praxis of ecclesiology. In practical terms, churches have been forced to make decisions on whether or not they are able to gather, and even if they are able to, questions abound in regards to what can be done. Here in Queensland, Australia, there were laws around how many people could attend church based on how many square metres were in the church, and for a time, the activities that churches participated in changed how many people were allowed per square metre. If a church elected to sing, for example, the number of people allowed at a gathering dropped to one person per seven square metres, but without singing, a church was allowed one person per four square metres. These legal restrictions forced churches to not only decide if they were able to gather or not, but how they would worship together if they were gathering.

For many Christians facing this COVID-19 context, simply electing to not meet seems like it is not an option. News stories worldwide often reported on pastors who opened their churches despite lockdown orders. In Hebrews 10:24-25, we are exhorted to consider how to stir one another up to love and good works, and to *not neglect meeting together* in the pursuit of encouraging one another.¹ This exhortation to meet together, along with other examples of Christians gathering in the New

¹ Hebrews 10:24-25, New Revised Standard Version.

Testament, was often enough to convince Christian leaders to engage in civil disobedience by opening church.

There is also an understanding, that beyond his omnipresent qualities, the *presence* of Jesus is more significant when we come together as Christians in his name; Jesus tells us in Matthew 18:20 "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."² So how does this changing landscape of the world where we are not to congregate reconcile with God's exhortation for us as his people to congregate together in the presence of Jesus? Is the church in a crisis?

Firstly, we need to realise that a crisis situation is certainly not new for the church. The world is constantly changing, after all, while the bible tells us that 'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever'.³ Surely, an organisation rooted in Jesus and his unchanging ways should expect to face challenges in a context that constantly changes. I am fond of a famous quote from Dutch theologian Hendrik Kraemer: "Strictly speaking, one ought to say that the Church is always in a state of crisis and that its greatest shortcoming is that it is only occasionally aware of it."⁴ Kraemer highlights that there is a valid reason for this state of crisis, which is tension between the essential nature of the church and the empirical condition of the church.⁵ It could be argued that the essential nature of church is that it is founded in Jesus and his unchanging ways, but the church's empirical condition is that it is forced to exist in a world that constantly changes. While history clearly shows that churches have changed over time (after all, the reformation occurred!), our core biblical texts that

² Matthew 18:20, New Revised Standard Version.

³ Hebrews 13:8, New Revised Standard Version.

⁴ Hendrik Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*. (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1947), 24.

⁵ Kraemer, *Christian Message*, 24.

inform discussion on themes such as gathering were written into a context where there was no alternative. To state the obvious, no writers in the bible could have had anything to say on the validity of churches meeting online or praying together over Zoom meetings because that kind of alternative to traditional gathering was inconceivable.

This tension between the unchanging nature of church in a changing world is highlighted and explored at length by Bosch in his seminal work *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* in 1991. His thesis statement was that the world was changing in ways that were neither incidental or reversible, and that with the advent of technology and globalisation the world itself had undergone a fundamental paradigm shift in thinking and experience. Because of this shift, mission and theology had also fundamentally shifted, and he highlighted that the world had undergone many profound crises throughout church history that resulted in paradigm shifts not only in the fundamental nature of the world and therefore society, but also within the church and the ways it was able to do mission.⁶ He goes on to highlight major paradigm shifts throughout history that have rightly influenced the way we look at and 'do' church and mission. The advent of things like globalisation, with fast and affordable travel across the world, for example, completely changed the context of commandments to 'go forth and spread the gospel' from when they were first given, when to get to another city you generally had to walk there. Specifically, Bosch highlights six major 'paradigms', tracing the history of the theology of mission from the paradigm of primitive Christianity through the patristic period, the medieval Roman Catholic paradigm, the Protestant Reformation Paradigm, the modern

⁶ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission, Twentieth anniversary ed* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2011), 4-9.

Enlightenment paradigm and through to the then-current (remembering the book was published in 1991) emerging ecumenical paradigm.⁷ Encouragingly, the church has survived and continued each time it has been faced with one of these paradigm shifts, and continues to exist today. While deeply held conservative views might state that church can never change because Jesus Christ and salvation are unchanging, the church inarguably has changed as it moves through historical contexts.

However, thirty years have passed between *Transforming Mission* and today. We have seen explosive advances in technology worldwide, and leaps forward in interconnectivity, speed of travel, and the trend towards globalisation. Furthermore, at the end of 2019 and throughout 2020 and 2021, we have experienced a pandemic in the form of the aforementioned COVID-19. There is an often repeated mantra that we are experiencing 'a new normal,' and a widespread understanding across society that what we understand as normative has been completely changed by COVID-19 and that, once this pandemic is over, what is normative to society will be completely different to what was normative before the pandemic. Tanya Plibersek, Australian Member of Parliament and Deputy Leader of the Labor Party between 2013 and 2019, argues that this is the case in *Upturn: A Better Normal After COVID-19*. She highlights that if you had asked people before the pandemic, everyone would have said major changes such as schools shifting to online learning, the doubling of unemployment benefits, the subsidising of wages, and especially getting Aussies to stay home from the pub, were impossible.⁸ Yet, they happened. She goes on to highlight that traditionally pandemics bring about rapid change, that things that would take lifetimes instead happen overnight; for example, in the 1300's the Black Death

⁷ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 185.

⁸ Tanya Plibersek, ed., *Upturn: A Better Normal after COVID-19* (Sydney, NSW: NewSouth, 2020), 1-2.

halved the population of Britain, but it resulted in the industrial revolution and liberated the slave class of serfs.⁹ What then, awaits us on the other side of this pandemic?

Arundhati Roy, novelist, penned an article in the *Financial Times*, titled '*The Pandemic is a Portal.*' In it, she posits that COVID-19 has made the most powerful people in the world kneel and bring the world to a halt, and that many of us are longing for a return to 'normality.' However, she argues that nothing could be worse for us than a return to normality and reinforces the argument that pandemics have historically forced humanity to leave the past behind and reinvent the world anew. She argues that COVID-19 is no different, and it is in fact a portal, between the old world and the new, a rupture in our history.¹⁰

We can see that society is observing the gravitas of COVID-19 and the resultant effects it is having on the economy, on the ways that we connect and engage with one another, and the fundamental ways our societies are structured and operate. If we accept the thoughts of writers such as Plibersek and Roy, that COVID-19 is changing what is normative about society, and that COVID-19 is a portal from which a new normal will emerge, then we have to also accept that this will have a lasting effect on the church. As aforementioned, whilst the fundamental nature of church is unchanging, it is subject to the empirical condition in which it finds itself. It is the premise of this paper that COVID-19 and the resultant effects on society are yet another paradigm shift that we are facing. While it may not be as major as the broad sweeping historical paradigm shifts outlined by Bosch, it is a major contextual change

⁹ Plibersek, *Upturn*, 3-4.

¹⁰ Arundhati Roy, "The Pandemic Is a Portal" *Financial Times*, April 3, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca>.

that the church, along with the whole world, has found itself in with little to no notice. Just like other paradigm shifts, as the church exists in the world and is therefore subject to it, this societal shift presents a crisis to church and necessitates a shift in our praxis of ecclesiology.

The changes to society that were made as a result of COVID-19 were rapid and dramatic, and accordingly the praxis of the church had to dramatically change. Many churches were forced to close their doors within the week, and the natural response for many churches, much like many other gatherings of people in the wake of COVID-19, was to go online. As a pastor, I personally remember facing our first lockdown. At our Monday meeting, everything was going ahead as per normal, and by Wednesday our team was figuring out how to move the entire service into an online space and navigating how to care for a congregation when the law was that we couldn't even be in the same room!

This paper is divided into three distinct sections ultimately aimed at evaluating church, our response to COVID-19, and answering the question of if we should gather, even if society tells us we cannot. The first section, 'The Crisis,' is intended to look more deeply at the COVID-19 crisis and specifics of the effects of the pandemic on the world and the church. It will serve to examine both the dangers presented by COVID-19 and the opportunities that can be found to move forwards amidst those dangers. The second section, 'On Church', seeks to examine a basic ecclesiology of what church is and tries to define what we are actually coming together to do, in order to establish a foundation for the next section to build upon. It is here that it must be reiterated that the goal of this thesis is not to be an ecclesiological paper, but one

rooted in practical theology. A discussion on the church and what it is could fill multiple books, let alone papers, and is beyond the scope of this thesis. Rather this section serves to establish biblical ideas and themes on the church that can be carried forward into this third and most important section, 'On Gathering.' This examination of gathering will look at key themes that are relevant to the context of COVID-19, namely seeking to answer the question of if we have an explicit commandment to gather as church in the New Testament no matter what is occurring, to examine the idea of civil disobedience by the church in the context of gathering despite lockdown orders, to examine if we are missing out on a crucial part of God's presence if we elect to meet online, and to determine if we are still fulfilling the role of church if we are only meeting in an online space.

While we can't control COVID-19, we can control ourselves and how we respond to it. We can elect to respond wisely and shift how we practice meeting as church to be safe and appropriate during a pandemic, and we can collectively shape what the new normal looks like after COVID-19. We can take solace in the fact that Jesus is the same as he was yesterday, that he is the same before, during, and after the pandemic. However, the situation we find ourselves in the midst of whilst worshipping him is distinctly changing. What should church look like during the pandemic? And what could it look like afterwards?

Part One - The Crisis

What does it even mean to say that the church is facing a crisis? As aforementioned, the church is always in a state of crisis; why therefore should we pay any particular attention to the specific crisis of COVID-19? In this section, I would like to present the argument that the societal changes brought about by COVID-19 represent a paradigm shift large enough to warrant a re-examining of ecclesiological praxis and thoughtful engagement with the question of if it is appropriate to continue gathering during a pandemic.

Somewhere amid Danger and Opportunity

There is a popular, albeit perhaps somewhat inaccurate, trope in the western world that the Chinese character for 'crisis' is made up of a combination of the characters for two other words: 'danger' and 'opportunity.' This phrase was perhaps made famous by John F. Kennedy, who often used the trope in his campaign speeches in 1959 and 1960. He went on to emphasise that in a crisis one should be aware of the danger, yet still recognise the opportunity said danger presented.

While a greater understanding of the Chinese language has shown this to be not *quite* true, the sentiment behind it is still a good one - in the face of a crisis, we are to be aware of the dangers presented, but cognisant of the opportunities that present themselves. We cannot and must not make light of the immense suffering felt worldwide as people not only lose loved ones but lose livelihoods and the ability to see one another due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, as Arundhati Roy

succinctly phrased it in the Financial Times: "Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different."¹¹

As we continue to move through 2021, and hopefully through the tail end of this pandemic, we are presented with the ability to look back at how we handled our response to the virus, what the effects on the church were, and ideally we are also able to look forward to opportunities; opportunities to emerge from this pandemic with clearer vision and stronger focus. So now, whilst we are somewhere amid danger and opportunity, in crisis, what are dangers that we face? And what are the opportunities we are presented with?

The Dangers to Church

COVID-19 has had a very real and visceral impact on the church that cannot be denied. As aforementioned, the infectious nature of the pandemic made it necessary for many governments around the world to impose limits or otherwise outright ban congregations from physically gathering for in person worship. Beyond being unable to gather, churches are also feeling the impact of decreased offerings and are having difficulty in carrying out social service activities. Frank Newport, a social scientist with a key focus on areas including the economy and religion has argued that this sudden cessation of in-person worship is one of the most significant sudden disruptions to religious practice in history.¹² He highlights that while previous shifts

¹¹ Roy, "The Pandemic is a Portal," *Financial Times*.

¹² Frank Newport, "Religion and the COVID-19 Virus in the U.S.," *Gallup*, April 6, 2020, <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/307619/religion-covid-virus.aspx>.

that incorporate technology, such as evangelism on radio and television, have been able to occur at a gradual pace, the transition to online church because of COVID-19 has not had the luxury of time to be ruminated upon.¹³ In April 2020, he questioned if this sudden impact of the church could have a long term impact on personal religiosity¹⁴, and with time and data it can be seen that the effects of this crisis on the church are measurable and observable.

Data collected in late April and early May 2020 by the Barna research group shows that one in three practicing Christians (in the USA) completely ceased church attendance during COVID-19. By their metrics, this means these Christians completely stopped engaging; they weren't even present for any form of online worship.¹⁵

The McCrindle research group has done similar statistical analysis here in Australia. According to their research released in 2020, 61% of Australian Christians attended church weekly before COVID-19, which has dropped to just 22% during COVID-19.¹⁶ While this dramatic drop can be reasoned to be due to lockdowns disallowing Christians from going to church and disallowing churches to even open, the percentage of Australian Christians attending church weekly online has not proportionately risen. Before COVID-19, 27% of Australian Christians attended church weekly online in some capacity, whereas during COVID-19, only 46% of

¹³ Newport, "'Religion and the COVID-19 Virus in the U.S.," *Gallup*.

¹⁴ Newport, "'Religion and the COVID-19 Virus in the U.S.," *Gallup*.

¹⁵ "One in Three Practicing Christians Has Stopped Attending Church During COVID-19," Barna Group, accessed October 3, 2021, <https://www.barna.com/research/new-sunday-morning-part-2/>.

¹⁶ Mark McCrindle and Shannon Wherrett, *The Future of the Church in Australia*. (Norwest, NSW: McCrindle Research, 2020), 28.

Christians in Australia were engaged with some form of online church weekly.¹⁷

Taking this data to its logical conclusion, we can see that between 61% and 88% of Australian Christians were engaged with their church on a weekly basis either online or in person before COVID-19, and somewhere between 46% and 68% were engaged with their church on a weekly basis during COVID-19 in 2020, depending on how mutually exclusive online and in person engagement was among the respondents. The statistics seem to point to some level of disengagement from weekly church engagement among Australian Christians in 2020, equalling approximately 15% to 20%. While correlation does not always equal causation, this is most probably due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Furthermore, regarding deeper engagement, the McCrindle research showed that before COVID-19, approximately three in five churchgoers were engaged with extra church activities such as Bible studies and prayer meetings, whereas during COVID-19, in 2020, that number fell to approximately two in five churchgoers attending these activities.¹⁸

The American Bible Society does comprehensive data collection every year in order to release a yearly report named *State of the Bible*. While the data is American, the statistical deep dive is helpful in examining trends throughout COVID-19. Of note, during COVID-19 spiritual mentorship also significantly fell. In their 2020 report, it was noted that the pandemic had a negative impact on mentorship activities, with less than three in ten Christians reporting they had mentored somebody in 2020, and only one quarter of Christians reported they had met with a mentor or somebody who was

¹⁷ McCrindle and Wherrett, *Future of the Church*, 28.

¹⁸ McCrindle and Wherrett, *Future of the Church*, 28.

helping them to grow spiritually.¹⁹ Furthermore, two in five American Christians highlighted specifically in 2020 that COVID-19 had a negative impact on their ability to serve and worship God.²⁰

It is worth noting that the equivalent Christian Statistical body in Australia, the National Church Life Survey, did not do a comprehensive equivalent data collection in 2020, and their 2021 survey period for data collection has been extended to last through to February 2022 due to complications from COVID.²¹ This both makes analysis of Australian data more difficult and serves to highlight the pervasive effect COVID-19 is having on all areas of the church, including supporting bodies such as the NCLS.

The statistics are worrying. Not only can we see a direct link between COVID-19 and a measurable decline in church engagement, but we can see a direct link between COVID-19 and participation in activities that deepen spiritual engagement, such as prayer groups, Bible studies, and Christian mentorship. Both of these observable trends present danger to the church as a whole.

While these are the pandemic's effects on the church, the church's impact on the pandemic must also be considered. It is possible that stubborn, in person, church attendance has contributed to a worsening of the pandemic both for society as a whole but also for the Christians who are attending church. The latest evidence as of May 2021 points towards the clear conclusion that there was a direct correlation between

¹⁹ Jeffery Fulks and John Farquhar Plake, *State of the Bible 2020*. (American Bible Society and Barna Group, 2020), 138.

²⁰ Fulks and Plake, *State of the Bible*, 57.

²¹ "NCLS Research - Home," NCLS Research, accessed November 16, 2021. <https://www.2021ncls.org.au/>.

church attendance and the spread of COVID-19.²² These higher rates of COVID-19 infection within churches that continue to meet are not only terrible for the church communities that are affected, but contribute to the increased spread of COVID-19 within the broader communities within which the congregation is situated.

These statistics speak to failure. Have we, as Christians who attend church, failed in our duty to love those around us and protect them from the pandemic by physically attending church despite COVID-19? In doing so, evidence shows we are causing a direct correlation with the spread of the virus in our communities. Is this truly loving our neighbours as though they were ourselves? Furthermore, have churches failed to provide clear pathways to online church and alternative means of interpersonal meeting, leading to a marked decline in overall church attendance and deeper spiritual engagement? Or perhaps, have the past ways of 'doing church' been insufficient, and being proven thusly now that they are being tested?

The statistics paint a clear picture: COVID-19 has been brutal to church attendance and engagement, worldwide. Both attendance and engagement have had a statistically significant drop, and the percentage of church that has continued to meet in person has directly contributed to the spread of COVID-19. If that isn't impetus for us to re-examine our ecclesiological praxis, then what is? Fortunately, there are incredible opportunities for churches to move into alternative means of gathering in online spaces that do not risk the health of churchgoers or their surrounding communities, and if managed well, can facilitate deep spiritual engagement.

²² Ryan Burge, "Faith in Numbers: Is Church Attendance Linked to Higher Rates of Coronavirus?" *The Conversation*, May 13, 2021, <http://theconversation.com/faith-in-numbers-is-church-attendance-linked-to-higher-rates-of-coronavirus-160527>.

Opportunities Forward

Whilst the landscape of danger due to COVID-19 certainly paints a bleak picture for the church, the pandemic also presents opportunities for the church to move forwards. As aforementioned by Arundhati Roy, the pandemic is a portal between the old world and a new one.²³ While the tragedies of the pandemic can never be discounted and should never be downplayed, the threat to the long-established patterns of 'doing' church and opportunities for significant change can actually be positives for the church at large. Jerry Pillay, Theology Faculty from the University of Pretoria, argues that COVID-19 shows a need for the church to become more flexible, resilient, and adaptable as it embraces new opportunities in this COVID-19 landscape.²⁴ He highlights the areas of Worship, Mission, and Theology as areas where church can embrace opportunities wrought by COVID-19 as it moves forward.

Opportunities Forward: Worship

As Christians we have been long accustomed to physical gatherings in order to worship publicly together. However, the pandemic has changed things: whereas once people may have been encouraged exclusively to physically attend church, there now seems to be an almost equal level of encouragement to attend church online, either through YouTube or a similar streaming platform. We can vividly see how the church has been forced to alter *how* it gathers, but much of this change has been *reactive* to the sudden changes brought about by the pandemic, rather than considered and

²³ Roy, "The Pandemic is a Portal," *Financial Times*.

²⁴ Jerry Pillay, "COVID-19 Shows the Need to Make Church More Flexible," *Transformation: An International Journal of Holistic Mission Studies* 37, no. 4 (October 2020): 266–75, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265378820963156>.

measured changes brought about due to theological contemplation. That is to say, if there were no global pandemic, churches would not have unanimously agreed that they needed to significantly increase their online presence and, in many cases, shift entirely to an online platform. Nevertheless, being driven to electronic platforms for public worship brings with it opportunities. Pillay highlights that this shift in worship has allowed Christians to be exposed to alternate forms of worship, liturgy, and preaching than they otherwise would be accustomed to - in fact, with churches worldwide moving to online spaces, a Christian can gain a worldwide perspective of church as they 'wander' online!²⁵ This can result in deeper appreciation for local church practices or it may open up new experiences of worship completely; COVID-19 has allowed for a dramatic increase in church options. Pillay goes on to argue that this opening of opportunity has "strengthened the possibilities of spreading the gospel on a broader scale and reaching the un-churched".²⁶ However, there are potential pitfalls to this approach. Sarah Zylstra, senior writer for The Gospel Coalition, highlights potential downsides to streaming worship, especially in areas where physical church is still an option. She argues that services such as livestreaming and podcasting can lead to lower church attendance and a higher rate of church switching, meaning Christians are not as deeply planted in their churches.²⁷ Despite this, she highlights wins for the kingdom - just one church she interviewed during COVID-19 has had around eighty people come to faith and join the church, all of whom attended their first services online.²⁸ Despite the potential pitfalls around potentially increasing a consumerist culture within the church due to the ease of switching church and lower

²⁵ Pillay, "Make Church More Flexible," 268.

²⁶ Pillay, "Make Church More Flexible," 268.

²⁷ Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra, "How Will COVID Permanently Change Churches?," *The Gospel Coalition*, March 12, 2021, accessed October 28, 2021, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/covid-change-churches/>.

²⁸ Zylstra, "How Will COVID Permanently Change Churches?," *The Gospel Coalition*.

attendance, and disregarding discussion around the theological validity of online spaces for worship (which will be addressed in a later section of this paper), it can be seen that there are worship opportunities for the church to embrace in this COVID-19 paradigm. Specifically, in being pushed into online worship spaces the church has become more widely accessible. Every church can now theoretically reach the entire world (or at least, the entire world that has access to an internet connection) rather than just their local area, and it seems new Christians are being born out of this movement.

Opportunities Forward: Mission

As well as changing the landscape of worship, COVID-19 has affected the mission of the wider church. As Pillay highlights, the traditional focus of mission always seemed to be to get the 'world' through the church doors and into the building.²⁹ However, for the obvious aforementioned reasons, this can no longer be the case. However, even before COVID-19, there was a push to challenge this kind of missional thinking. For example, movements such as Fresh Expressions and Alpha challenged the normative idea of 'bringing people to a church service', but even these movements are still somewhat reliant on gathering in a church building. Alan Hirsch questioned our normative ways of 'doing' mission well before the pandemic in his 2006 book *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church*.³⁰ He highlights that one of the issues with our western church model is that as churches grow and become more stable they tend to become more middle-class, and the middle class preoccupation

²⁹ Pillay, "Make Church More Flexible," 269.

³⁰ Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church*. (Grand Rapids, Mich: Brazos Press, 2006).

with safety and security runs counter to authentic gospel values. When we also adopt consumerist values due to societal influence, we also add comfort and convenience to those middle-class values.³¹

The way this set of values clashes with missional gospel values can be argued to not be a rejection of religious thought (as church attendance is maintained) but rather a reinterpretation of the value of Christianity in terms of utility.³² For example, the exhortation to love and care for the poor in society was often moved to the periphery of the faith (in so called middle-class western churches with a focus on comfort and convenience) and only embraced if it didn't substantially interfere with personal financial interests.³³ Therefore, it can be seen that as churches embrace comfort and convenience, the gospel centrality of mission becomes distorted. After all, going out on mission certainly isn't convenient!

Hirsch argues that this shift in church structure over time leads to churches that grow at a steady rate due to Christians transferring from smaller, dying churches and that there are less and less new converts, creating the paradox of bigger and more well equipped churches that are doing less and less mission.³⁴ He goes on to argue that the only recovery from this value shift is a complete recalibration of the church community values, which often comes with pain (and admittedly, numerical loss).³⁵ Furthermore, he argues that true community is formed when a community faces a period of liminality together, going through a shared ideal out of the context of

³¹ Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 219.

³² Robert Inchausti, *Subversive Orthodoxy: Outlaws, Revolutionaries, and Other Christians in Disguise* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Brazos Press, 2005), 42-43.

³³ Inchausti, *Subversive Orthodoxy*, 42-43.

³⁴ Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 220.

³⁵ Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 220.

security and into an unknown.³⁶ Therefore, there exists a missional opportunity for church as COVID-19 has essentially 'done the work for us' in dismantling the structures within church of comfort and convenience. Perhaps COVID-19 can serve as the liminal space in which the church transitions into something more missional and less consumerist, where new forms of stronger community can be formed.

Opportunities Forward: Theology

COVID-19 has forced certain theological views and pre-suppositions on church to be re-examined. Perhaps most pressingly, and as a point of focus for much of the rest of this essay, COVID-19 has both suddenly and inadvertently caused us to question what it means to be the church without physically going to church. It can almost feel blasphemous to question the structures of church and the ways of 'doing church' that seem to have always existed. However, Moltmann, theologian and Professor of Systematic Theology states that 'Christian theology must be contemporary theology, in the positive sense of the world, and it must "share the sufferings of this present time" with the whole creation... in every age it must find its Christian identity anew. There must be the dialectical process of adjustment and reformation, relevance and identity.³⁷ A contemporary theology in the context of the sufferings of this present time must therefore grapple with COVID-19 and the broad changes it has thrust upon society. There is a need to examine practical theology around gathering.

³⁶ Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 221.

³⁷ Hans Küng, ed., David Tracy, ed., and Moltmann, Jürgen *Paradigm Change in Theology: A Symposium for the Future*. (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 220-224.

As aforementioned, while churches have been forced to close physically, many are not remaining closed but instead moving to online spaces. This shift and the theological ramifications will be examined more critically in the next section of this essay. For now it is suffice to say that churches are being forced to critically re-examine long held theological views and practices and there is a movement, by necessity, away from the traditional church building. However, it is helpful to remember that church isn't the building, but the people. Eddie Gibbs, senior professor of Intercultural Studies at Fuller Theological Seminary, argues the following: 'Church' must be understood as referring to a people rather than to a place, and a congregation represents not just a weekly gathering that people are a part of, but a community in which each person actively belongs, receives support, and is encouraged to make their own distinctive contribution. It consists not of passive consumers, but of creative participants. It is structured not just for attracting a congregation, but also for sending and dispersing people on mission. It is comprised of an extensive network of clusters of believers providing mutual support, as well as engaging the broader networks of relationships of which they are a part. The church is not primarily a place of refuge, but a community of people on pilgrimage.³⁸

While we can agree that 'church' is the people, not the place, there is still a sense and expectation that these people that make up church will gather. Gibbs' reflection on these people helps frame that gathering, however. More important than physically being in the same room, Gibbs highlights that people should actively belong and participate in the church community they are a part of, and beyond being attracted in

³⁸ Eddie Gibbs, *ChurchMorph: How Megatrends Are Reshaping Christian Communities*, Allelon Missional Series (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2009), 54-55.

to the community, the people must be sent out on mission. A community on a pilgrimage doesn't need a building during COVID-19 - and perhaps they never did.

Overall, it is indisputable that COVID-19 has had a major impact on churches across the world, just as it has had a major impact on all areas of life and society.

Statistically, it can be seen that both attendance and engagement with church has declined. Churches have been unable to meet and those that are meeting have arguably been contributing to the spread of the virus in some areas; but we have seen a major reactive movement as churches embrace online spaces. Despite the crisis, in this there are opportunities. Worship has become more accessible than ever before in these online spaces, not only for Christians but also for non Christians. This has changed the missional landscape and prompted new ways of thinking about mission.

However, these online spaces are fundamentally different to how church traditionally has been throughout history. We now have the opportunity to examine our theology on gathering and question if we truly need to gather in person weekly, especially during a pandemic! Before these alternative online spaces are completely embraced, a deeper look at the theology of church and of gathering is warranted.

Part Two - On Church

Before being able to delve deeply into questions around the act of Christians gathering and what it could mean for this gathering to take place online rather than in person, fundamental questions around church itself must be explored. Ideas around 'what church is' and 'what church should be' must be explored in order to consider whether a completely online congregation can truly be considered a church. After all, Christians gather together all the time. There are bible studies and connect groups in homes, Christian friends meet up at coffee shops, Christians may even be flatmates in a shared house! However, as Christians we have an implicit understanding that these gatherings are not 'church', while gathering together on a Sunday at the correct building is 'church'. But why? And furthermore, what about church online? Is meeting for church online just another form of Christians meeting, but not *truly* 'church'?

Again, here it is important to note that this is not a comprehensive ecclesiology paper, and many volumes far longer have been written on what church is; the goal of this section is to re-examine key biblical themes and directives in order to inform discussion on questions that arise around gathering, specifically regarding the current COVID-19 context.

Perhaps the most helpful starting point is to examine biblically how God commanded the early church to gather, and to define a basic biblical understand on what church is in order to separate modern church praxis into the two broad categories of 'what is biblically commanded' and 'what we do due to tradition.' Many churchgoers would be familiar with what could be described as a modern liturgy, starting with music, prayer,

then welcome and announcements, greeting one another, more music, then the sermon, before ending with one more song! But why do so many churches 'do church' in this order? Is it because 'it works?' Or is there a biblical commandment to follow such a structure? When moving into online spaces, churches can somewhat continue to mimic this structure, but of course things are lost - the question is, are the things that we lose the things that make 'church' church? When examining churches that are gathering in alternative online spaces, or any other alternative forms of gathering, and weighing up things that are missing, it is important to consider whether what is missing is biblical or cultural.

Trying to Define Church - Is it Visible or Invisible?

To this end, it is perhaps helpful to construct a 'litmus test' of sorts which can be applied to Christian *gatherings*; if a group claims to be a church, is it fulfilling the theological requirements of a church? To do this, a working definition of church is needed.

It should be noted that defining church is truly beyond the scope of this paper, and I will be leaning on theologians and their definitions and ideas that have the advantage of far deeper insight and exploration than this thesis has the scope for.

In his *Systematic Theology*, Wayne Grudem gives a helpful definition of the church: 'the church is the community of all true believers for all time.'³⁹ This definition highlights that the church is made up of all who are truly saved by the death of Christ.

³⁹ Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 853.

Here, Grudem is referring to the entire church as a whole, all believers across the world across all time. The bible helpfully refers to the church in these universal terms. In Ephesians 5:25, Paul teaches that "Christ loved *the church* and gave himself up for her".⁴⁰ We know Jesus didn't give himself up for a subset of Christians in one place or time, but rather the whole church.

There is another key point to be extrapolated from both Grudem's definition and this bible passage: *the church* is the community of believers. Perhaps there is a modern mistake in referring to the building we go to on Sunday as *the church*. Christ didn't give himself up for a building, but for the people, for the community. Local churches then must be smaller subsets of this definition, pockets of people who are part of the community of all true believers for all time.

However, Grudem also highlights the limitations of this definition; namely that the church has both a visible and an invisible aspect. If the above definition is taken to a logical conclusion, then the true church is invisible *to humanity* as we cannot see the true state of other people's hearts and therefore their true status as a believer.⁴¹ This invisible aspect is only truly visible to God, we are told in 2 Timothy 2:19 that "the Lord knows those who are his."⁴² The true, invisible, church is therefore the church as seen from the perspective of God rather than from the perspective of humanity. This is a difficult definition to work with, as by definition we cannot truly see the church! However, this invisible church has a visible aspect. The visible church, conversely, is the church as humanity sees it. It includes all those who profess the Christian faith and give evidence of this with their lives. Certainly, across all congregations in the world

⁴⁰ Ephesians 5:25, New Revised Standard Version.

⁴¹ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 855.

⁴² 2 Timothy 2:19, New Revised Standard Version.

there are some unbelievers present in churches, but we cannot tell with any certainty who these unbelievers are; only God can. Nevertheless, biblically we can highlight examples of unbelievers within church communities. For example, Paul warns the Ephesian church of false teachers in Acts 20:30, saying "Some even from your own group will come distorting the truth in order to entice the disciples to follow them."⁴³ However, this presence of those who were not true believers, distorting the truth (and even teaching distorted truth!) did not make the Ephesian church 'not truly a church.' Rather, the local Ephesian church had both a visible and invisible aspect, whereby God knew the true invisible church which had a visible community. The fact that the visible community contained unbelievers and was an inaccurate reflection of the true invisible community did not invalidate the existence of the invisible community.

This distinction on the true church being either the visible or invisible church can serve as a point of contention: The Roman Catholic church has argued that the one true church is the visible structured organisation of the Roman Catholic Church. A statement issued in 1987 as a '*Pastoral Statement for Catholics on Biblical Fundamentalism*' argued that seeing the church as the 'invisible church' (which they refer to as 'biblical fundamentalism') 'eliminates from Christianity the church as the Lord Jesus founded it'.⁴⁴ The statement goes on to argue that within 'biblical fundamentalism' 'there is no mention of the historic, authoritative church in continuity with Peter and the other apostles,' and that 'Christ chose Peter and the other apostles as foundations of his church,' that 'Peter and the other apostles have been succeeded by the bishop of Rome and the other bishops,' and that therefore 'the flock of Christ

⁴³ Acts 20:30, New Revised Standard Version.

⁴⁴ John Whealon, "Pastoral Statement for Catholics on Biblical Fundamentalism," *Origins* 17, no. 21 (Nov. 5, 1987): 376-377.

still has, under Christ, a universal shepherd.'⁴⁵ Within Catholicism there is an affirmation that the 'true' church is the visible organisation with an unbroken line of succession from the apostles.

Reformers such as Martin Luther and John Calvin were eager to refute this affirmation and argue for the aforementioned invisible church.⁴⁶ In Calvin's *Institutes*, he argues that the succession of the Catholic church has no value if the truth of Christ has not been properly conserved and become corrupted.⁴⁷ His argument for the foundation of the true church therefore was not within any visible organisation, but rather 'biblical fundamentalism'. What truly mattered was the biblical truth of Christ being rightly conserved and taught.

It is at this point within the debate that I must highlight my own bias; I belong to a protestant denomination and have worked as a pastor within the Uniting church. Therefore my implicit bias is towards the understanding of the true church being the invisible one, as God sees it, rather than the visible church as an organisation.

However, even with an understanding of an invisible church, the church irrefutably has a visible aspect as well. Until COVID-19 made gathering untenable, visibly the church could be seen to be gathering every Sunday as each congregation went to their building and worshipped, regardless of whether that congregation was Catholic or Protestant. Regarding the visible church, Grudem gives the following definition: "The

⁴⁵ Whealon, "Pastoral Statement for Catholics on Biblical Fundamentalism," *Origins*, 376-377.

⁴⁶ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 855.

⁴⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John Thomas McNeill, The Library of Christian Classics (Louisville, Ky. London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 1043-1045.

visible church is the church as Christians on earth see it."⁴⁸ If we see the visible aspect of the invisible church as the people who gather weekly to worship Christ, then this visible aspect will no doubt include some unbelievers who attend church yet have not given their hearts to Christ; therefore while they may be part of the visible church, they do not belong to the true invisible church. For this reason, it seems more accurate to view the 'true' church as the invisible church, whereby only God knows who truly is and is not a member.

So why does it matter if the true church is the visible or invisible church? It is interesting that within the Catholic argument *for* the visible (and Catholic) church being the true representation of church, they name their opposing viewpoint 'biblical fundamentalism.' In other words, in their view the church doesn't extend from fundamental principles of the bible, but also must incorporate historic tradition. From this viewpoint, alternative forms of gathering cannot truly be church, for if church were truly only represented by what was tangibly visible, and had to remain rooted in adherence to tradition, then changing what is tangibly visible and deviating from tradition would mean that the gathering ceases to be church. However, seeing the church as an invisible church whereby biblical fundamentals are of central importance but the traditions and visible elements are malleable allows for opportunity. This is especially the case within the context of COVID-19. Due to restrictions on gathering, church is having to meet in untraditional ways. Therefore, it is helpful to embrace the model of the invisible church not just because it appears to be more accurate model, but because it allows us to respond to a changing world by gathering and worshiping in alternative ways as long as we are rooted in biblical fundamentalism. Therefore, it

⁴⁸ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 856.

is important to appreciate that as long as the church remains true invisibly, as God sees it, we have freedom to alter the visible elements as we are only changing church as humanity sees it.

The 'Biblical Fundamentalism' of Church, the Ekklēsia

Firstly, it should be reiterated that the purpose of this essay is not a comprehensive recap of ecclesiology, or a proof of 'why' we have church as God's people. However, if we are exploring alternative models of church and operating under the idea that the invisible church, as God sees it, is the true church, and we accept that therefore there is some accepted malleability to the visible structures of church, such as liturgy and tradition, we must be certain on what truly is biblically fundamental about church.

What we refer to and now translate as 'church' is *ekklēsia* in the original Greek of the New Testament. Originally, before taking on its current meaning, *ekklēsia* was a secular, functional, word used to mean an 'assembly of persons', essentially used to refer to a physical gathering of people.⁴⁹ The translators of the Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint, would also translate the Hebrew word *qahal*, meaning assembly, into *ekklēsia*.⁵⁰ Therefore, at the surface level of language, there is almost a dogmatic sense where alternative forms of gathering would not be permitted; church is *ekklēsia*, and *ekklēsia* is a physical gathering of people. In fact, this is the central argument of some churches that have chosen the path of civil disobedience during COVID-19 lockdown restrictions. In an open letter stating that they intended to meet regardless of lockdown laws, one church stated that "The definition of the word demands that a

⁴⁹ Paul D. L. Avis, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Ecclesiology*, Oxford Handbooks (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 16.

⁵⁰ Avis, *Oxford Handbook*, 16.

church not be reduced to less than a gathering of people... Where there is no physical gathering there is no church. For the church to exist it must gather."⁵¹ It must be questioned if this is truly the case, as the semantic domains of particular words are not usually quite so dogmatic.

It can be seen that the meaning of *ekklēsia* shifted, even during early church history, from the political meaning of an 'assembly' to a more theological and spiritual meaning of 'church', and this can be seen even within the passages of the New Testament.⁵² The gospels only use the word *ekklēsia* three times (and all are instances within Matthew) but as multiple scholars have pointed out, the central narrative point of the gospels is not the church, but rather it is Jesus.⁵³ Therefore, they do not contain propositional theological instruction about the *ekklēsia*. However, it can be argued that the church is all throughout the gospels, even when not being directly referenced; the church after all birthed the New Testament and the writings within are the foundation for the self-understanding of the church and bear witness to its life.⁵⁴ Therefore, any reading of the gospels (and indeed the entire New Testament) with regards to the church will not have to only examine the explicit statements that reference the *ekklēsia*, but also how all the narratives are expressions of the church, its life, its function, and its self expression.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Jacob Reaume, "Here We Stand: The Church Must Meet," *Trinity Bible Chapel*, December 3, 2020, <https://trinitybiblechapel.ca/here-we-stand-the-church-must-meet/>.

⁵² Avis, *Oxford Handbook*, 17.

⁵³ Richard A. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography*, Twenty-fifth anniversary edition (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2018), 70.

⁵⁴ Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Church in the New Testament* (London; Tunbridge Wells: Burns and Oates, 1974), 9-10.

⁵⁵ Schnackenburg, *The Church in the New Testament*, 9-10.

Paul Avis, editor of the Oxford Handbook of Ecclesiology, somewhat humorously claims that for New Testament critics, "looking for the ecclesiology of the Gospels is like looking for oranges in an apple orchard: it is simply asking the wrong kind of question."⁵⁶ However, the uses of *ekklēsia* do warrant a deeper look.

Matthew 18:17 reads: "If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."⁵⁷ Here, both uses of 'church' in the NRSV translation are *ekklēsia* in the original Greek. In this instance, the word is most plausibly read along the lines of 'assembly', in line with what would have been contextual Greek (or Jewish) usage of the word.⁵⁸ However, while these uses of *ekklēsia* can be specifically read to mean a local gathering, there is another usage of *ekklēsia* in Matthew 16:18. In it, Jesus says "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it."⁵⁹ Avis argues here that this usage of *ekklēsia* clearly denotes a reference to the future, universal, church, rather than any one assembled congregation.⁶⁰ In other words, Jesus is using the word for 'assembly' to refer not to a literal in person assembly of Christians that will be built, but rather the community of all believers across all of time. Therefore, if Jesus uses the word *ekklēsia* to refer to a more nebulous grouping of people across time and space rather than a specific gathered congregation, can we definitively argue that because *ekklēsia* means assembly the only true representation of church is a gathered, in-person assembly? Based on the usage here, we cannot.

⁵⁶ Avis, *Oxford Handbook*, 56.

⁵⁷ Matthew 18:17, New Revised Standard Version.

⁵⁸ Avis, *Oxford Handbook*, 56.

⁵⁹ Matthew 16:18, New Revised Standard Version.

⁶⁰ Avis, *Oxford Handbook*, 56.

So what does this mean? Are the gospels relatively unconcerned with ecclesiology with the exception of one reference to the future church? Of course not. As aforementioned, reading the gospel with regards to the church must also examine how the narratives express the church, its life, function, and self expression because the church itself birthed and maintained the New Testament, and therefore its writings function as the self-understanding and witness of the church. Therefore in order to understand the ecclesiology of the gospels we must move away from searching for direct propositional statements about the church (as frankly, they barely exist), but rather we must seek an understanding of the narratives of the gospels and how those narratives question and shape a worldview and way of living that would emerge through interacting with Gospel narratives.⁶¹

For example, let us look at Matthew 5:13. It reads "You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot."⁶² On the surface, there are no directly propositional statements about the *ekklēsia*, about how the church is to function. However, it has to be argued that ecclesiological ideas and themes are carried in this verse (and undoubtedly the entire sermon on the mount!) Jesus is speaking directly to his followers, with a 'you are' statement, a statement that confers identity onto whom he is directing the statement. And while we must not be careful to ignore the context and realise he is speaking to a specific group of disciples at a specific time in history, we must also be acutely aware that it was the early church that preserved and acted upon this teaching; the early church heard themselves being addressed by Jesus in this 'you are' statement, and as a result those in the church today

⁶¹ Warren Carter, *Households and Discipleship: A Study of Matthew 19-20*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament 103 (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1994), 204.

⁶² Matthew 5:13, New Revised Standard Version.

still see instruction and usefulness in the imagery given by Jesus here.⁶³ In simple terms, even though the statement 'you are the salt of the earth' is not a directly propositional statement in reference to the *ekklēsia*, the church today undoubtedly understands itself to be the salt of the earth. This is important as we must understand that the gospels fundamentally determine the shape of the church even though their direct instruction on the church is minimal.

An entire breakdown and examination of the ecclesiology to be found in each gospel is outside the scope of this essay, and here it is helpful to work from the understandings gleaned by recognised theologians whilst remembering the key idea that the gospel narratives shape the church despite not directly giving it ecclesial instruction. Avis highlights a summary of gospel ecclesiology in the *Oxford Handbook of Ecclesiology*. The two narrative images he highlights from the gospel of Mark are gathering-in of the people of God, and the formation of a messianic community of disciples.⁶⁴ He highlights how from Mark 1 to Mark 8, there is a focus on the 'people of God', through the proclamation of the imminence of God's kingdom, John's baptism, and through that the call to repentance and a promise of baptism with the Holy Spirit, calling of disciples to work for the kingdom, preaching of the word, and performance of miracles which make the coming of the kingdom of God visible.⁶⁵ From Mark 9 onwards, Avis highlights the discipleship ecclesiology, whereby Jesus focuses on teaching and growing the disciples into a messianic community, living out the kingdom through confessing Jesus as Christ, being called to follow him through imitation, brave and costly engagement as publicly living as people of God,

⁶³ Paul Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, New Testament Library (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 29.

⁶⁴ Avis, *Oxford Handbook*, 69.

⁶⁵ Avis, *Oxford Handbook*, 69.

fellowship built around remembering Jesus, and commissioning the apostles to mission.⁶⁶ Through the book of Mark, the *ekklēsia* is called to act as agents of the kingdom of God, preaching the same message as Jesus but also to demonstrate the coming of God's kingdom in their own lives.⁶⁷ Avis goes on to highlight that there are two ecclesiological models consistent throughout the Gospels: the 'people of God' ecclesiology and the 'discipleship' ecclesiology.⁶⁸

More important than just physically gathering then, as one of the visible aspects of what we do, are perhaps the invisible aspects of what we do as the church. We are called to be gathered not physically but gathered as the people of God, and we are called into discipleship with one another. As an *ekklēsia* we are not an 'assembly' by virtue of visibly being in the same location, but rather by invisibly belonging to the community of Jesus and having a commitment to discipleship within it.

The Ekklēsia - Adaptation in Acts

While the Gospels provide Jesus-centric narratives that serve to guide the ecclesiological shape of the church, the book of Acts is able to serve as a narrative on the early church itself. Avis presents an interesting theme within the *ekklēsia* in Acts, highlighting that Luke continues the ecclesiology that is established in the gospels but also shows adaptation to the circumstances and context in which the early church finds itself.⁶⁹ This is critically important to note as we carry on an understanding of how ecclesiology has continued to adapt throughout history and how it may adapt

⁶⁶ Avis, *Oxford Handbook*, 69.

⁶⁷ Avis, *Oxford Handbook*, 69.

⁶⁸ Avis, *Oxford Handbook*, 92.

⁶⁹ Avis, *Oxford Handbook*, 83.

today as our biblical prototype of church was shown to be one that adjusted contextually. As aforementioned, Moltmann outlined that "Christian theology must be contemporary theology", and that "in every age it must find its Christian identity anew. There must be the dialectical process of adjustment and reformation, relevance and identity."⁷⁰

Therefore, it stands to reason that if this concept of dialectical adjustment and reformation can be seen within the book of Acts, our example of church is not one that holds to tradition, refusing to change, but rather one that is willing to change according to the context in which it finds itself. In other words, the *ekklēsia* must both have continuity with earlier biblical ecclesiology but also adapt to the changing context it finds itself in. It must be biblically fundamental, but also contextual. It continues, but adapts.

Avis outlines some key examples of this dual continuation and adaptation of the early church in Acts. A good example is the focus in the Gospels of Jesus' deeds of power; Luke serves to highlight the Apostolic deeds of power as a continuation and adaptation of what came before.⁷¹ Other examples include the baptism of John and the baptism with the Holy Spirit, and what was once table-fellowship with Jesus continuing and adapting to a life in community for those who followed Jesus.⁷²

It is this community of Jesus' followers that function as the emerging church in the book of Acts. Avis argues that from the outset of Acts, Luke goes to great lengths to show that the early church functions as a community and that the narrative of Acts is

⁷⁰ Küng, Tracy, and Moltmann, *Paradigm Change in Theology*, 220-224.

⁷¹ Avis, *Oxford Handbook*, 83.

⁷² Avis, *Oxford Handbook*, 83.

careful to portray the community of believers as a unified body under unified leadership.⁷³ This body is first referred to as the *ekklēsia* (within Acts) in Acts 5:11⁷⁴ and this usage (along with Luke's continued usage of the word) undoubtedly refers to the entirety of the early church, being the entirety of Christianity at the time.⁷⁵

It has been argued that Luke uses *ekklēsia* to refer to the body of God's people in a specific location, and that therefore the *ekklēsia*, and the church today, is a local incarnation of God's people, gathered.⁷⁶ However, strict adherence to this line of thinking is debatable. As aforementioned, the local *ekklēsia* was the entirety of the universal church early in Acts, and therefore usage of the word can reflect both of these truths. To say that the *ekklēsia* specifically must be a locally gathered and congregated group of visibly gathered believers does not take into account either the fact that at the time the *ekklēsia* referred to was also the invisible universal body of believers, nor does it take into account the aforementioned usage of *ekklēsia* by Jesus in Matthew 16:18.

A Litmus Test - Is This a Church?

At the start of this section, the question arose around different forms of gathering and whether they could be considered true representations of the *ekklēsia*. It has been argued that the true church is the invisible church, as God sees it, and that this invisible church possesses visible qualities that we can see. It has been highlighted

⁷³ Avis, *Oxford Handbook*, 87.

⁷⁴ Acts 5:11, New Revised Standard Version.

⁷⁵ Charles K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles. I: Preliminary Introduction and Commentary on Acts I - XIV*, Latest impr (Edinburgh: Clark, 1998), 271.

⁷⁶ Alexander Loveday, "Community and Canon: Reflections on the Ecclesiology of Acts." In *Einheit der Kirche im Neuen Testament*, ed Alexeev et al. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 45-78.

that we ought to not confuse the order of importance between those two. We have seen that the meaning of the word *ekklēsia* derived from an assembly, and that some arguments have been made that church is only truly church therefore when it is codified by visible assembly. However, with an understanding that the true nature of church is invisible, and that the *ekklēsia* was often used to refer to a nebulous category of all believers across all time as well as a local assembly, the argument that the church is only a church with physical assembly falls flat.

So what is the 'litmus test'? By definition, we cannot know the invisible church, only God can. However, we can see that of utmost importance a church must adhere to fundamental biblical truth. Beyond that, it has the freedom to adapt to the context it finds itself in, and in Acts we see a model of this dual continuation of biblical truth coupled with contextual adaptation and continuation. We also see that we are called to assemble not physically, but to be called together as the people of God, and engaged with discipleship.

Perhaps this is the litmus test. Christians just physically being gathered isn't what makes the *ekklēsia* church, otherwise social coffee catch-ups or Christians who live together in a share house, gathered, are a church. However, believers set apart as the people of God engaging in community discipleship, adapting biblical truth to the context they are in, can be an *ekklēsia*. House churches gathering in persecuted locations such as China, where they cannot have a building, can be an *ekklēsia*. A group of Christians gathering at a home to study the bible can be an *ekklēsia*. The universal gathering of all believers across time and space does not need a building; perhaps too then, a gathering online in an alternative space can be an *ekklēsia*.

Part Three - On Gathering

With an understanding of the church, the *ekklēsia*, what does it then mean for that church to gather? Matthew 18:20 tells us that when two or three gather in Jesus' name, he is present among them,⁷⁷ however this obviously predates the advent of telecommunications and the internet. In context, gathering would have meant coming together in person, as there was no alternative, which is not the case today. While we understand that God is omnipresent, there seems to be something special about Jesus' presence in the context of his people gathering. The question arises: is Jesus present in this specific way if two or three are gathered on a Zoom meeting or a telephone call?

This section will aim to examine biblically how God commanded the early church to gather, taking into account our understanding of the *ekklēsia*. It will also aim to examine some of our current contextual responses to limitations on gathering and responses we have made.

A Wrong Response

COVID-19 has shattered the forms of gathering that perhaps we once took for granted as the church. Disregarding countries like China, where meeting as Christians has carried a very real risk of significant persecution, meeting as a Christian for church has been a relatively safe thing to do. However, with the contextual advent of lockdowns and restrictions on the number of people in one place due to COVID-19,

⁷⁷ Matthew 18:20, New Revised Standard Version.

gathering for church as Christians has become a legal matter aside from the questions on whether it is wise and what the specific risks of spreading the disease may be.

In this context, some churches have made calls and acted out in civil disobedience. There are many examples across multiple countries. In August 2021, almost \$50,000 dollars in fines were issued to church congregants who broke the law by gathering for church at the Christ Embassy in Blacktown.⁷⁸ Interestingly, the service also had an alternative means of gathering by being streamed live on Facebook,⁷⁹ however the church still chose to allow an illegal in-person gathering, with no masks or QR code tracking. The pastor was quoted as saying "In the name of Jesus, we refuse every lockdown in our cities."⁸⁰ On top of fines, in May 2021 a pastor was arrested in Melbourne for opening worship during the lockdown.⁸¹ The pastor was quoted as saying he was choosing to "obey God over man [sic],"⁸² painting his civil disobedience as a push for freedom of religion. The issue is worldwide - in March 2020 a pastor was arrested in the United States of America, in Florida, for holding Sunday church services, breaking lockdown orders.⁸³ He was charged, despite attempting to claim that the church was an essential service, citing that other essential services like police and fire emergency services were still operational.⁸⁴ In November 2020, in the United Kingdom, one anonymous pastor admitted to the media that they

⁷⁸ Mark Reddie, "Pastor Who Urged Sydney Congregation to 'refuse Every Lockdown' Hit with Prohibition Order," *ABC News*, August 25, 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-08-25/blacktown-church-fines-for-people-who-broke-covid-rules/100406202>.

⁷⁹ Reddie, "Prohibition Order," *ABC News*.

⁸⁰ Reddie, "Prohibition Order," *ABC News*.

⁸¹ Melissa Iaria, "Christian Pastor Arrested for Covid Breach," *News.com.au*, May 31, 2021, <https://www.news.com.au/national/victoria/courts-law/christian-pastor-arrested-for-flouting-lockdown-rules/news-story/3a32aca0908b0c4e86be57c0de9452bb>.

⁸² Iaria, "Christian Pastor Arrested for Covid Breach," *News.com.au*.

⁸³ Daniel Burke, "Police Arrest Florida Pastor for Holding Church Services despite Stay-at-Home Order," *CNN*, March 31, 2020. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/30/us/florida-pastor-arrested-river-church/index.html>.

⁸⁴ Burke, "Police Arrest Florida Pastor," *CNN*.

had been holding clandestine church services ever since the start of COVID-19, comparing their church services to the underground church movement in China.⁸⁵ Another minister admitted to civil disobedience because of government overreach, stating that he didn't "believe the government has the authority to tell the church of Jesus Christ that it can't gather for worship."⁸⁶ He went on to argue that despite being classed as non-essential, worship was actually the most essential thing in life. He went on to say "We answer to a higher authority. When there is a contradiction between the laws of the country and God's command, the Bible is very clear that God's command must win out."⁸⁷ While this is a small subset of all Christianity, more and more these actions are causing Christianity to be associated with anti-government civil disobedience rhetoric.

There seems to be a certain argument that runs central to the case for gathering in violation of the law and thereby committing civil disobedience. The first point would be that the Bible commands us to gather for worship, and the second would be that the government, due to lockdown laws, is forbidding Christians from gathering for worship. However, the third point of this argument is that God's authority is higher than human authority, and as Christians we are called to obey God over humanity. Therefore, as Christians, our only choice is to commit civil disobedience and gather for church, even if we are persecuted for our obedience to God.

However, while this argument seems clear enough on the surface, it needs to be called into question. There is an underlying assumption in this line of reasoning that the first,

⁸⁵ Harriet Sherwood, "'Let Us Disobey': Churches Defy Lockdown with Secret Meetings," *The Observer*, November 22, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/nov/22/let-us-disobey-churches-defy-lockdown-with-secret-meetings>.

⁸⁶ Sherwood, "Let Us Disobey," *The Observer*.

⁸⁷ Sherwood, "Let Us Disobey," *The Observer*.

and most fundamental, premise is true: that the Bible commands us to (physically) gather for worship. While we know the second premise to be true, that there are restrictions on gatherings, there is also a question about the validity of the case for civil disobedience in the third premise of this argument, that we are always called to obey God over man.

This argument will be further examined, and in doing so, questions around our response to the context of COVID-19 as an *ekklēsia* can be answered.

The First Premise - Are we Commanded to Gather in the New Testament?

The question on whether there is a clear biblical imperative to gather locally as a church, as the *ekklēsia*, really does seem to be question upon which our response to COVID-19 entirely hinges upon.

The first means of examining this question is to consider what was discussed about the nature of the *ekklēsia* in the previous section. The aforementioned working definition borrowed from Grudem is that "the church is the community of all true believers for all time."⁸⁸ In this, it was highlighted that the *true* church is the invisible church, unseen to us but known to God, made up of all who are truly Christian. The visible church was therefore seen to only be a part of the whole, once again borrowing Grudem's definition: "The visible church is the church as Christians on earth see it."⁸⁹ In other words, the invisible church is the true universal *ekklēsia*, and the visible

⁸⁸ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 853.

⁸⁹ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 856.

portions - the local congregations and buildings - the parts we see, are the visible manifestations of the greater, invisible, church.

This raises the first question on gathering, that must be posited in response to all the churches that elect to meet illegally. If the true church is the church as God knows it to be, the invisible church, why are they placing such an emphasis on gathering as the visible church? The church, after all, is the community of believers, and the visible aspect of that church is the church as Christians on earth see it. Would worshipping online affect the invisible church? If the church were to gather in alternative spaces, would those who God knows to be truly His be any different? The answer is no, *unless a clear biblical directive from God is being broken due to not gathering*. It shouldn't matter if the visible church is being affected, as it is only the church as Christians see it, not as God sees it; it is just a part of the far greater, universal *ekklēsia*.

So, is there a clear biblical directive being broken? As aforementioned, the Gospels had very little propositional theological instruction on the *ekklēsia*. To understand the ecclesiology of the gospels, the narratives needed to be understood in order to reach the worldview and way of living that would shape the church, and that was one of being called out as the people of God and committing to discipleship within the community of believers. If, within online church, there is a commitment to discipleship and the people of God are still set apart, then it would seem no biblical directive is being broken.

Therefore, perhaps the greatest chance of finding a direct biblical directive on gathering would be in the letters. They contain much directly propositional instruction, often centred around correcting what churches at the time were doing. There is one such passage that is frequently cited to demonstrate a biblical command by these pastors and congregants that are being fined and arrested for being Christian, Hebrews 10:24-25.⁹⁰ Quoted directly from the *New Revised Standard Version*, it states: "And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching."⁹¹

Here is what could appear to be a direct biblical command to *not neglect meeting together*, and in order to not neglect meeting together we must therefore meet together. However, there are a few considerations, starting with the structure of this verse in the original Greek. The Greek word that is translated to 'not neglecting' is *egkataleipo*, which is used in a negative sense to mean to *desert, forsake, or leave*.⁹² The word *egkataleipo* is used here as a participle, meaning that it is not the main verb of the sentence but rather is used to support the main verb of the sentence; here the main verb is *katanoeo*⁹³, translated in the NRSV as 'let us consider'. Therefore, the author of Hebrew's main directive in this verse is to *consider*, not to *not neglect*. Finally, the word translated to 'meet together' is *episunagoge*, a word meaning 'to gather,' and did not always refer to gatherings for the purpose of worship.⁹⁴

⁹⁰ Paul Carter, "Is There a Command to Gather in the New Testament?," *The Gospel Coalition Canada*, January 3, 2021. Accessed December 1, 2021, <https://ca.thegospelcoalition.org/columns/ad-fontes/is-there-a-command-to-gather-in-the-new-testament/>.

⁹¹ Hebrews 10:24-25, *New Revised Standard Version*.

⁹² Carter, "Is There a Command to Gather in the New Testament?," *The Gospel Coalition*.

⁹³ Carter, "Is There a Command to Gather in the New Testament?," *The Gospel Coalition*.

⁹⁴ Carter, "Is There a Command to Gather in the New Testament?," *The Gospel Coalition*.

To unpack this, as mentioned the main instruction in this verse is to *consider*, specifically to consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds. As a part of this, the author gives the example of not neglecting to meet together, but this example is explicitly subservient to the commandment to *consider* how to provoke one another to love and good deeds. In fact, the word used here to refer to meeting together doesn't even always mean gathering for worship, weakening the argument that this is a 'proof text' that we as Christians *must* come together physically for worship. There is therefore no strict command in these verses to gather, and even the command to *consider* is in the subjunctive tense, which in the bible is usually seen when something is an encouragement rather than a commandment.⁹⁵

Of course, in the absence of a pandemic, the author here is suggesting something that is helpful. We are to consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, and an example of how to do that is to not neglect meeting together with other Christians! There is no doubt for all who call themselves Christian that ongoing fellowship would serve to deepen their ability to encourage one another in love. However, it is important to understand what is actually being exhorted and rebuked here. There is no commandment to gather for corporate worship every seven days, but rather this is a gentle rebuke to those who are either too proud, self-reliant, or selfish to be a part of the Christian community. Philip Hughes, New Testament scholar, highlights that the main purpose of this passage is to rebuke the Christians that were unconcerned with the wellbeing of the church, the body of Christ, which they themselves were members of, stating that this was symptomatic of selfishness and

⁹⁵ Carter, "Is There a Command to Gather in the New Testament?," *The Gospel Coalition*.

egocentricity.⁹⁶ Taking this lesson to heart, if this passage is telling us to be concerned with the wellbeing of the body of Christ, then perhaps it could even be interpreted as telling us to not congregate in order to keep one another safe, and to encourage one another in the love and good deed of slowing down the spread of a pandemic.

While there would be detractors to this point of view, and indeed this is often used as the proof text from which other arguments that are pro-gathering flow,⁹⁷ it can not be clearly seen that this is a commandment to gather for corporate worship, and even if it were it says nothing on the specificity or frequency of those gatherings. It clearly doesn't apply to the context of today, where church gatherings have been temporarily forbidden due to a pandemic. It must also be noted that there is a clear difference between *pausing*, or *temporarily suspending* meeting together and *neglecting* to meet together.

These verses serve as an encouragement to spur one another on to love and good deeds, and highlight that gathering together can be a helpful outworking of that encouragement. It admonishes those who are too proud, egotistical, or selfish to devote themselves in service to the wellbeing of the body of Christ. In fact, the 'greatest commandment' from Matthew 22:36-40 is to Love God with all our hearts and souls and minds, and the second is to love our neighbours as though they were ourselves.⁹⁸ Jesus states that all the Law and Prophets hang on these two

⁹⁶ Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, Mich: W. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 1977), 415.

⁹⁷ Will Schuurman, "On Gathering, Assembly Bans, and Romans 13," *Trinity Bible Chapel*, May 27, 2020, <https://trinitybiblechapel.ca/gathering-assembly-bans-romans/>.

⁹⁸ Matthew 22:36-40, New Revised Standard Version.

commandments.⁹⁹ Are we really loving our neighbours if we are taking actions that actively serve to spread a deadly pandemic throughout the population? Are we really loving God if we are putting the church at risk health-wise and also tarnishing its name among the public by disobeying health directives to the point of being arrested?

It can be seen that the first premise of the argument for civil disobedience is indeed flawed. The bible does not necessarily command us to gather weekly, on Sunday, for corporate worship. It would be impossible to argue that we are not *encouraged* to gather as God's people for the sake of encouraging and loving one another, and that in a perfect world with no pandemic gathering in person would seem to be the optimal way to accomplish that. However, in this context where gathering is both illegal and unwise, it does not seem like we are commanded to gather from the Bible, and the question must arise: there are, thanks to technology, alternative forms of gathering, such as gathering online. Are we, as the body of Christ, the church, the *ekklēsia*, able to carry out the commandment to love one another and encourage one another towards good works through forms of communication that do not rely on physical gathering?

The Third Premise - Is Obeying God Over Man an Exhortation to Civil Disobedience?

We must also examine in this pro-gathering response the exhortation to Civil disobedience that comes from point three of the aforementioned argument: that we are called to obey God over humanity, as God's authority is higher than humanity's

⁹⁹ Matthew 22:36-40, New Revised Standard Version.

authority. Even with the first premise debunked, one might argue that an encouragement from God to gather means more than a law from man [sic] not to gather, and therefore the only choice is still to commit civil disobedience and gather as a church. Some churches claim exactly this, while others continue to use Hebrews 10:24-25 as a scriptural commandment to gather.¹⁰⁰ Trinity Bible Chapel in Canada, for example, penned an open letter in December of 2020 to their government stating their intention to continue to meet despite government lockdowns, stating that "TBC (Trinity Bible Chapel) believes that scripture commands us to meet for worship in person, that the definition of "church" requires us to gather in person, and that the Law of God demands we gather at least weekly."¹⁰¹ Their open letter then touches on this theme of civil disobedience, stating that "Scripture also commands Christians to be subject to governing authorities," citing Romans 13:1, but then stating "The command, however, is not ultimate. In such cases when government edicts contradict God's commands, Christians must obey God over Government... ...a lockdown order to cease meeting as a church body for fellowship and worship would contradict the commandments of God."¹⁰² This church isn't the only one. In July of 2020, John MacArthur announced that his church would continue to hold in-person services, even though California was at the time in lockdown due to COVID-19.¹⁰³ In his statement justifying remaining open, he argued that Christ was sovereign over every earthly authority, and that "therefore, we cannot and will not acquiesce to a government-

¹⁰⁰ Reaume, "Here We Stand, *Trinity Bible Chapel*."

¹⁰¹ Reaume, "Here We Stand, *Trinity Bible Chapel*."

¹⁰² Reaume, "Here We Stand, *Trinity Bible Chapel*."

¹⁰³ Morgan Lee, "When John MacArthur Reopens His Church Despite COVID-19 Orders," *Christianity Today*, July 29, 2020. Accessed December 1, 2021, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/podcasts/quick-to-listen/civil-disobedience-john-macarthur-covid-19-churches-pandemi.html>.

imposed moratorium on our weekly congregational worship or other regular corporate gatherings. Compliance would be disobedience to our Lord's clear commands."¹⁰⁴

While the previous subsection dealt with the apparent 'scriptural command' to gather found in Hebrews 10:24-25, and found it lacking, the call to civil disobedience as a response to COVID-19 must also be examined. One of the central texts appears to be Romans 13:1-2, which states: "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment."¹⁰⁵ This passage is quite clear in that it commands Christians to be subject to governing authorities, as God has instituted these authorities and therefore disobedience to these authorities is disobedience to God. While this seems to be a general principle that would completely make any form of civil disobedience invalid, it does not exist in a void.

The bible has a clear example of an exception to this rule. In Acts 5, the disciples were commanded by the Jewish rulers to not teach in Jesus' name, and Acts 5:29 states: "But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than any human authority."¹⁰⁶ There therefore seems to be a clear exception to the general principle found in Romans 13:1-2, whereby if human authority forbids what God has explicitly commanded, then followers of God must obey God over humanity.

¹⁰⁴ John MacArthur, "Christ, Not Caesar, Is Head of the Church," *Grace Church*, July 24, 2020, <https://www.gracechurch.org/news/posts/1988>.

¹⁰⁵ Romans 13:1-2, New Revised Standard Version.

¹⁰⁶ Acts 5:29, New Revised Standard Version.

What then do we therefore see about civil disobedience? While it must be noted that the topic of civil disobedience by Christians is large enough and nuanced enough that it could be the topic of an entire paper, the main thrust of biblical understanding seems to be that the general rule is for Christians to obey human authority, except for the specific exception where God's commands come into contrast with human authority. For real world examples, we can look to the Christian church in places like China, where churches are explicitly banned and persecuted, and pastors are jailed.¹⁰⁷ Here is a clear example of a human authority clashing with what God commands, and generally the international Christian community champions the Chinese church which continues to meet, and continues the work of preaching Jesus. The argument could therefore be extended from there. If we champion the Chinese church for meeting despite government orders, then why shouldn't we champion churches everywhere for meeting despite lockdown orders?

The answer here is nuanced. The situation in China, for example, more closely mirrors the example found in Acts 5. On a point of religious ideology, preaching Jesus, salvation in him, and indeed the Christian message, was being forbidden by the Jewish Sanhedrin then, and by the Chinese authorities now. Conversely, the Christian message, teaching about Jesus and the salvation to be found in him is not being banned or repressed in any way by human authorities in countries like Australia, rather, the act of gathering in person is what is being restricted. In other words, Christian ideology is not being attacked (with the exception of the argument that gathering is a part of Christian ideology) but rather the act of gathering is. Other

¹⁰⁷ Lily Kuo, "In China, They're Closing Churches, Jailing Pastors – and Even Rewriting Scripture," *The Observer*, January 13, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/13/china-christians-religious-persecution-translation-bible>.

industries are also facing lockdown measures and many businesses are suffering; this is not persecution unique to the church.

Christian thought has also touched on this idea throughout the centuries. Richard Baxter, an English Reformer, tackled this in his work *A Christian Directory*. He wrote: "Question 109: May we omit church-assemblies on the Lord's day, if the magistrate forbid them?"

Answer: 1. It is one thing to forbid them for a time, upon some special cause, (as infection by pestilence, fire, war, etc.) and another to forbid them statedly or profanely."¹⁰⁸

Baxter's response shows a nuance in understanding when it comes to assemblies of the church being forbidden. Baxter draws a line between church being forbidden for a practical reason, naming pestilence, fire, and war as examples, and church being forbidden "statedly or profanely". Interestingly, pestilence, what we today would call a pandemic, is given as a special cause that might cause church to be forbidden for a time. This difference in cause when it comes to a ban on churches gathering in person highlights the difference in situation in countries like Australia and countries like China. Lockdowns as a response to COVID-19 are for the safety of the population, and are only forbidding gathering for a time, due to infection by pestilence.

Conversely, China's ban on Christian gathering is profane in intention, with the goal of suppressing Christian teachings. Therefore, while a Christian in the face of a profane ban on church gathering would be compelled to gather in defiance in accords with Acts 5:29, a Christian in the face of a temporary ban due to a special cause (such

¹⁰⁸ Richard Baxter, *The Practical Works of Richard Baxter, Volume 5*. Edited by William Orme (London: Parternoster Row, 1830), 465.

as perhaps, the COVID-19 pandemic) would actually be bound to obey in accord with Romans 13:1-2.

Baxter is not the only historic theologian to draw this distinction. Martin Luther wrote on the intersection of pandemic and Christian practices in 1527, writing in the context of the bubonic plague and its cyclical reoccurring outbreaks.¹⁰⁹ He wrote on the idea of fleeing areas overcome with plague, and didn't settle clearly on if one should stay or leave these areas. Regarding those Christians who should stay, Luther highlighted that Christians with responsibilities to others should remain and serve others despite the risk to themselves; he cites such examples as clergy, public servants, parents to children. His central argument for those staying in affected areas was to care for those who needed it, and not to desert one another.¹¹⁰ Luther however weighs this against the desire to preserve one's own life, arguing that preservation is commanded from God. He argued that we are to avoid 'death and disaster' in the understanding that this will not interfere with our obligation to love our neighbour.¹¹¹ While some argued that those with faith should stay and accept whatever comes as God's will, Luther argued that this thought taken to its logical conclusion would prohibit one from putting out a house fire, seeking medical attention, or taking necessary steps to ensure they were warm enough in winter to survive.¹¹² It should be noted that Luther's plague ethics were rooted in love for neighbours and wise steps in self preservation. He made sure to distinguish between loving a neighbour and reckless bravado. He criticised those who sought to 'tempt God' by not using appropriate medicine and by not avoiding

¹⁰⁹ A. Hancock, "Calculated Risks: Exploring Plague Ethics with Luther and Barth," *Acta Theologica* 40, no. 2 (2020), 69.

¹¹⁰ Hancock, "Plague Ethics," *Acta Theologica*, 70.

¹¹¹ Hancock, "Plague Ethics," *Acta Theologica*, 70.

¹¹² Hancock, "Plague Ethics," *Acta Theologica*, 70.

situations where infection was a strong possibility.¹¹³ It was his view that God had gifted humanity with both intelligence and medicine, and therefore Christians should use these gifts to protect themselves in order to care for others.¹¹⁴ It can be argued that Luther's plague ethics centred around two key obligations: one to use all intelligent means to protect one's own wellbeing, and the other to fulfil the responsibility to love others.¹¹⁵

Karl Barth also offers a rounded discussion relating to health and risk to oneself. It should be noted that Barth resists the urge to identify universal rules that must be applied to all moral situations but rather he argues that every individual Christian is called to discern God's commands in their contexts (though not without conversation with others) in a process of ongoing discernment.¹¹⁶ Barth approaches illness through the theological lens of the existence of evil, whereby evil, the enemy of God, threatens creation.¹¹⁷ Therefore, according to Barth, our human response to illness cannot be surrender or submission, but opposition.¹¹⁸ Barth argues that just as Jesus defeated death and sickness, through miraculous works during his ministry, Christians are called to join Jesus in opposing sickness despite our human limitations.¹¹⁹ Barth argued that God commands human willing towards good health, and that having good health is obedience to God in affirmation of our human existence, and therefore we are responsible for our health, including learning what is best to do through both education and experience, and also through consultation with medical experts.¹²⁰

¹¹³ Hancock, "Plague Ethics," *Acta Theologica*, 70.

¹¹⁴ Hancock, "Plague Ethics," *Acta Theologica*, 71.

¹¹⁵ Hancock, "Plague Ethics," *Acta Theologica*, 71.

¹¹⁶ Hancock, "Plague Ethics," *Acta Theologica*, 71.

¹¹⁷ Hancock, "Plague Ethics," *Acta Theologica*, 72.

¹¹⁸ Hancock, "Plague Ethics," *Acta Theologica*, 72.

¹¹⁹ Hancock, "Plague Ethics," *Acta Theologica*, 72.

¹²⁰ Hancock, "Plague Ethics," *Acta Theologica*, 73.

Barth highlights issues such as hygiene and the role of the doctor, and affirms trustworthiness in medical knowledge accumulated through research.¹²¹ It is also central to an understanding on pandemics that Barth not only argues for health being an individual responsibility, but a social and systematic responsibility.¹²² It can be argued that in terms of plague ethics, Barth urges people to seek health using all available means, and that we should also work to establish a society where the health of all members is supported.¹²³

In light of COVID-19, Dr Hancock of the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary released a paper designed to examine plague ethics and our response to COVID-19 today by looking back at Luther and Barth. From understanding their theology and their response to pandemics and health issues, Dr Hancock helpfully extracts six key themes that can guide us today, which will help us determine whether civil disobedience in the face of lockdowns to COVID-19 are warranted.

Perhaps the most important for our topic, the first key theme that Hancock extrapolates from the theologies of Luther and Barth is *the nature of resistance*.¹²⁴ Neither Luther or Barth advocate submission to illness, but both actually urge humanity to oppose the disease.¹²⁵ While many of the aforementioned Christians are exhibiting an oppositional spirit in the context of COVID-19, by civilly disobeying and gathering despite a lockdown, what they are opposing must be highlighted. They are resisting government run public health agencies, medical experts, doctors, and the law, rather than resisting COVID-19 itself. As aforementioned, Luther's resistance to

¹²¹ Hancock, "Plague Ethics," *Acta Theologica*, 73.

¹²² Hancock, "Plague Ethics," *Acta Theologica*, 73.

¹²³ Hancock, "Plague Ethics," *Acta Theologica*, 73.

¹²⁴ Hancock, "Plague Ethics," *Acta Theologica*, 74.

¹²⁵ Hancock, "Plague Ethics," *Acta Theologica*, 75.

the virus, and his reason for staying in a dangerous situation, was to provide medical assistance to those who needed it; it was in order to love his neighbours. Christian resistance to the virus should be encouraged, but it should be to provide medical support where it is needed and better the health of those around us. It has already been shown earlier in this paper that Christians gathering despite lockdown orders served to accelerate the spread of COVID-19. This should call into question the nature of our resistance. In opening despite lockdown laws, are we partnering with Jesus in defying disease, or are we partnering with our own desires to defy health directives?

The second key theme Hancock extrapolates from the theologies of Luther and Barth is that *medical science is a gift*, and the third key theme is the importance of *the lives of others*.¹²⁶ Both Luther and Barth emphasise the use of all means available to care for one's own health, and advocate for scientific medical practices of their time. In particular, Luther advocated for quarantine and apt usage of medications that were available to combat the bubonic plague.¹²⁷ In practicing civil disobedience, in our current context, churches are disregarding the common grace that is medical knowledge and the application thereof, disregarding this second key theme. Also, again, Luther highlighted not taking grave risks and entering places with a risk of spreading the plague, and Barth highlighted the importance of healthcare being a systematic responsibility. In our care for the lives of others, we should take pause before disobeying lockdown mandates and opening churches anyway, as gathering in person poses risk to the lives of others - not only to those within the congregation choosing to take said risk, but to those in the community who would be affected by both an increased spread of the virus and increased chance of viral mutation that

¹²⁶ Hancock, "Plague Ethics," *Acta Theologica*, 75.

¹²⁷ Hancock, "Plague Ethics," *Acta Theologica*, 75.

comes with an increased spread of the virus. Luther highlights that medical risk is something undertaken for the sake of the wellbeing of the lives of others, not in spite of the risk to the lives of others. Hancock argues that 'lone ranger' pastors who continue to open church and congregate in the face of lockdowns (and in doing so, attempt to demonstrate 'superior faith') actually have no support from Luther's works.¹²⁸

The fourth key theme highlighted by Dr Hancock is that of *creative substitution*.¹²⁹ He highlights that as we weigh up opening church or not, we should consider Luther's ideas on substitution. Luther advised that we should stay in areas that were dangerous if it was for the sake of caring for others unless a substitute could be found - that is, unless alternative care arrangements could be made or those in the need of care could also flee the infected area.¹³⁰ While some might argue that churches need to open for the sake of human connection, we must consider whether appropriate creative substitution to that danger can be found. Just as Luther advocated for the lessening of medical risk if there was an appropriate substitution to that medical risk, we should consider the alternatives to the risk of gathering in person, namely gathering online. As we live in a time and with the technology to communicate online, to worship together and pray together online, one must consider if it is appropriate to engage in civil disobedience and gather when there are creative substitutions available.

The fifth key theme Hancock extrapolates is that *health is systemic*, and the sixth theme he highlights is *graceful discernment*.¹³¹ He argues that as Christians, we are

¹²⁸ Hancock, "Plague Ethics," *Acta Theologica*, 76.

¹²⁹ Hancock, "Plague Ethics," *Acta Theologica*, 76.

¹³⁰ Hancock, "Plague Ethics," *Acta Theologica*, 76-77.

¹³¹ Hancock, "Plague Ethics," *Acta Theologica*, 77-78.

called to seek the health of all. Specifically, he highlights Barth's argument that the health of all may even involve breaking down existing social structures that impede the health of all.¹³² This challenges us and our insistence to gather. While the previous themes perhaps serve to inform us on civil disobedience, and allow us to discern that this is perhaps not an instance where we are called to disobey lockdowns, this theme actually makes us look the other way, at our own systematic social structures within the church. If health is systemic, and it is the duty of Christians at times to challenge the systems that exist in order to bring about good health, then perhaps the current lockdown restrictions are not enough to discern whether we should gather in person or not in the face of this pandemic. Perhaps we are called to even dismantle our own social structures, namely that we do gather weekly, in person. In areas where lockdown restrictions are more lax, or states that are slower to lockdown in the face of an increasing case load, perhaps churches can even take it upon themselves to elect to not congregate for a time for the sake of the systemic health of the community they find themselves in. This ties into the sixth theme, that we as Christians have discernment to the contexts which we find ourselves in. We aren't called to a blanket dogma on whether we should meet or not in the face of a pandemic, but rather we ought to listen to one another, listen to appropriate medical professionals, and listen deeply to God as our situations change.

So, are we called to civil disobedience in the context of COVID-19? I would argue that we are not, and that the works of theologians such as Baxter, Luther, and Barth also highlight that we are not. We are subject to the general biblical principle of obedience to human authorities, and the example given where the disciples elected to

¹³² Hancock, "Plague Ethics," *Acta Theologica*, 77.

obey God over humanity was in the face of human law contradicting God's law. With an understanding that there is no explicit biblical command to gather, the directive to civil disobedience loses merit. This is coupled with the fact that the specific example in the bible to obey God over human authority was in the face of a ban on preaching Jesus. Lockdowns are no such ban, and discourse in alternative online spaces on Jesus is allowed. Theologians of the past who also wrestled with plagues have fleshed out these ideas; Baxter draws a line between a temporary cessation on gathering due to specific reasons such as pandemic, and profane reasons to cease gathering. Luther and Barth explore ideas around plagues and health and from there we see key theological ideas form around the idea of resisting disease and taking best medical practices while doing all we can to love our neighbour. If these ideas are at the core of our faith, then are we really called to gather, and in doing so promote disease and ignore best medical practices, and also put our neighbours at risk?

Church Online - Are we Missing Out on God's Presence?

There is one more critical question regarding gathering that must be explored. As previously explored, this paper has examined if there is a clear biblical mandate to gather no matter what context we are facing as a church, and it is the position of this paper that there is no such clear biblical directive. This paper has also unpacked the idea of civil disobedience, and found no clear case for civil disobedience in the context of COVID-19. Therefore, in circling back to the previous argument cited in favour of gathering, where the first premise is that we are commanded to worship, the second being that we are being forbidden from doing so, and the third being that

God's authority supersedes human authority and therefore we should gather anyway, we can see that this argument does not hold merit.

However, even understanding this as we move to alternative spaces for church, such as online church, there is a key question: are we missing out on God's presence? In the act of gathering, Jesus tells us in Matthew 18:20, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."¹³³

God is omnipresent - there is nowhere where he is not. Therefore, even where two or three are not gathered in the name of Jesus, God is there. Despite that, Jesus takes care to tell his disciples this point and the church has taken care to preserve what Jesus said. Therefore, there seems to be something special about this presence of Jesus where two or three are gathered in the name of Jesus. What does it mean for Jesus to be among them?

Further to this, despite all that has been said, the question must be raised as to whether gathering online fulfils this special requirement to gather and be in the presence of Jesus. Despite our human understanding of gathering, does Jesus elect to show up over a zoom call where two or three are gathered, or in an online church service being streamed where two or three are watching?

It should be noted that this verse isn't a command. Jesus doesn't say, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them, so therefore you must gather in my name weekly." This verse doesn't appear to be a commandment to

¹³³ Matthew 18:20, New Revised Standard Version.

gather, but rather some kind of promise of some special kind of presence from Jesus when we do gather.

It is also worth looking at both the distinguishing characteristics and purposes of the church, and examining how these are affected by alternative means of gathering. After all, a question worth examining is the one of if we need to return to gathering in person at all once the COVID-19 crisis is over. It could be argued that we don't need to gather in person ever again if we accept that there is no explicit commandment to gather, that we shouldn't engage in civil disobedience to gather, and if we were to accept that there was nothing special about gathering in person.

Jay Kim, author and teaching pastor, argues for an understanding of online church being centred around an understanding of 'compromise, not convenience.'¹³⁴ In a article written in March 2020, he highlighted the necessity of moving to online meetings instead of live ones in the face of COVID-19, but insisted that we clarify this movement to a digital space was a temporary compromise rather than an ongoing convenience.¹³⁵ He highlights that while congregants will undoubtedly find it easier to attend church from home, he worries that this convenience will undo the discipline Christians have of church attendance and argues that 'gathering as the church in real time and space fundamentally matters.'¹³⁶

This argument and sentiment is echoed by Matt Smethurst, pastor, author, and managing editor of The Gospel Coalition. In an article written in July 2020, he argues

¹³⁴ Jay Kim, "Taking Church Online in a Coronavirus Age," *The Gospel Coalition*, March 12, 2020, accessed December 7, 2021, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/church-online-coronavirus-age/>.

¹³⁵ Kim, "Taking Church Online," *The Gospel Coalition*.

¹³⁶ Kim, "Taking Church Online," *The Gospel Coalition*.

that this season of online church has made him more convinced that online church is not a substitute for church in person.¹³⁷ He humorously compares the idea of 'where two or three are gathered' to the idea of 'where two or three are logged in.'¹³⁸

Smethurst highlights the repeated refrain that the church is not a place, but a people; however, he argues that while this is true and that we should not equate church with a building, being a people accepts the corollary that it is a people who gather together in a place.¹³⁹ In this argument, he leans on the aforementioned Matthew 18:20.

Smethurst argues that the believers spoken about by Jesus in this passage are physically together, and that this gathering informs the identity of the gatherers; the act of gathering gives definition to the people of the gathering.¹⁴⁰

Furthermore, Smethurst defines an idea of the function of Jesus' presence where two or three are gathered as depicted in Matthew 18:20. He highlights how Matthew 18 depicts a congregation assembling for the function of church discipline, and highlights that Jesus' presence in the gathering is presence in their decision to enact church discipline.¹⁴¹ It can therefore be inferred that Jesus' presence beyond his omnipotence where two or three are gathered is Jesus' authority; where two or three are gathered in his name they are gathered with the authority of Jesus in order to carry out church function.¹⁴²

¹³⁷ Matt Smethurst, "The Church Irreplaceable: Why God's People Must Gather," *Desiring God*, July 19, 2020, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-church-irreplaceable>.

¹³⁸ Smethurst, "The Church Irreplaceable," *Desiring God*.

¹³⁹ Smethurst, "The Church Irreplaceable," *Desiring God*.

¹⁴⁰ Smethurst, "The Church Irreplaceable," *Desiring God*.

¹⁴¹ Smethurst, "The Church Irreplaceable," *Desiring God*.

¹⁴² Smethurst, "The Church Irreplaceable," *Desiring God*.

Jonathan Leeman, elder, author, and editorial director for 9Marks, further highlights this idea in his essay *'The Church Gathered.'*¹⁴³ He highlights that churches function like embassies of heaven, with the authority to make provisional judgements regarding proper teaching and confession of the gospel and membership of the kingdom of heaven.¹⁴⁴ This doesn't mean that that churches are able to make people Christian when they aren't, or that churches get to decide what the gospel is, but rather Jesus decrees these truths and gives churches the authority to make pronouncements. Therefore, Leeman argues, for church to truly be church, the Christians that make up the church body must agree on those pronouncements.¹⁴⁵ This, Leeman argues, is the crux of Matthew 18:20; two or three gathered in Jesus' name are gathered because they are in agreement in pronouncing who Jesus is, and what he has done in the gospel.¹⁴⁶ A church therefore gathered in his name agrees with Jesus, and Jesus affirms that agreement with his presence in the form of his authority.¹⁴⁷ In other words, he isn't any more 'there' than he already was in terms of his omnipresence, but he affirms that the gathering in his name represents him, speaks for him, and functions as a kind of embassy of him.

There is biblical support for this argument of two or three gathered conferring the authority of Jesus rather than any form of deeper connection, spirituality, or presence beyond omnipresence found in the Old Testament. Deuteronomy 19, among the many chapters in Deuteronomy that provide laws, provides a legal framework concerning witnesses. Deuteronomy 19:15 reads, 'A single witness shall not suffice to convict a

¹⁴³ Jonathan Leeman, "The Church Gathered," *The Gospel Coalition*, accessed December 7, 2021, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/the-church-gathered/>.

¹⁴⁴ Leeman, "The Church Gathered," *The Gospel Coalition*.

¹⁴⁵ Leeman, "The Church Gathered," *The Gospel Coalition*.

¹⁴⁶ Leeman, "The Church Gathered," *The Gospel Coalition*.

¹⁴⁷ Leeman, "The Church Gathered," *The Gospel Coalition*.

person of any crime or wrongdoing in connection with any offence that may be committed. Only on the evidence of two or three witnesses shall a charge be sustained.¹⁴⁸ We see this idea of 'two or three' again, but here it is the evidence of two or three witnesses. In other words, one person's testimony alone isn't enough to convict someone, but a consensus among God's people of wrongdoing was enough to level a charge against someone. The two or three were not in charge of decreeing the laws, but rather proper discernment regarding the laws and together they possessed the authority to level or not level a charge against someone. It is in this context that Matthew 18:20 can then further be understood as an echo of this previous verse in Deuteronomy. Two or three in Jesus' name, or a consensus acting in Jesus' name, can be understood to carry his authority for the purposes of church governance, for example, even though they don't decree what the church is or what the requirements are to be a member of the kingdom of heaven, Jesus does.

If the church gathered therefore has no extra presence of Jesus but rather authority from Jesus borne from spiritually discerned consensus, then functionally there does not appear to be cause to gather in person due to Matthew 18:20. The body of Christians that make up a church, and especially the body that make up a church's leadership, would be able to come to a consensus on issues of governance without physically meeting with the technologies available to us today. Furthermore, a body of believers gathering in online spaces are more than able to declare clearly what they believe about Jesus and why they are assembling in his name.

¹⁴⁸ Deuteronomy 19:15, New Revised Standard Version.

Consider the thought exercise; imagine a situation occurs in a church requiring immediate action from church leadership after hours. If the leadership of said church gathered over a phone call and came to a consensus on the appropriate church discipline, would that decision be any less valuable than if the same conversation and consensus had been reached were the church leadership meeting physically in a room to discuss the issue? Of course not! Both instances of leadership consensus carry the authority of Jesus within the church within the framework of understanding Matthew 18:20, regardless of if the consensus was reached over the phone or in person. In both examples, the leadership, or for the purposes of this passage, the two or three, were gathered in Jesus' name, and therefore the resultant actions would carry the presence of the authority of Jesus. If we can clearly see how in this specific example the status of gathering physically or not does not matter, then it stands to reason that broadly a church should be able to carry the representative authority of Jesus conferred by Matthew 18:20 even if it is not able to physically gather and only exists in an online space. It can be seen that a church is able to carry the presence of the representative authority of Jesus that is conferred when two or three are gathered even in the absence of physical gathering due to the presence of spiritually discerned consensus within the body of the church.

Church Online - Barriers and Missing the Mark

Finally, while it can be seen that there aren't issues preventing church from gathering online, there are still barriers in place when it comes to online church. One major concern with church moving to an online space is that the church community can experience barriers not just of distance, but also time due to the way online church

may be constructed. Many churches are choosing to record their sermons and prayer in advance in order for Sundays online to operate smoothly, raising questions about the authenticity of pre recorded spiritual prompting and prayer. Another major concern with online church are that some of the marks of church, specifically administration of the sacraments, are missing or inauthentic. Baptism and communion online aren't possible in the same way as they were in person without major adjustments in how the sacraments are administered.

Anna Cho of the department of Systematic Theology and Ecclesiology at Stellenbosch University, South Africa, argues that instead of focusing on worship and if it can take place in the church or not, we should focus our discourse around church and COVID-19 on the church community and how we will go about 'doing church' in the future.¹⁴⁹ Through an understanding of speech act theory, she highlights that the barriers of distance (through not being physically together) and time (through potential pre-recorded services, or congregants watching the service at different times) that can be created by doing church online are not as significant as they may appear to be.

She highlights that the functions of the church are the *Kerigma* (translated as the Word), the *Leiturgia* (translated as the worship or the service), the *Koinonia* (translated as communion), and the *Diaconia* (translated as the devotion or service), and she argues that these functions are realised within the people that make up the church, the community.¹⁵⁰ Grudem highlights a similar understanding of the purposes of church, splitting the purposes up into our ministry to God through worship, our

¹⁴⁹ Anna Cho, "For the Church Community after COVID - 19," *Dialog* 60, no. 1 (March 2021), 14.

¹⁵⁰ Cho, "For the Church Community," *Dialog*, 14.

ministry to believers through nurturing in the faith, and our ministry to the world through evangelism and mercy.¹⁵¹ We should consider whether churches gathering online instead of in person inhibits the church community from achieving its purposes and therefore prevents the church from being a church. After all, even if there is no explicit command to gather and if we are able to attain the presence of Jesus' authority through consensus online, if the church community ceases to carry out the functions of a church then it is no longer a church.

Anna Cho argues that a church is able to overcome the absence of physical gatherings and maintain the church community, along with maturing and growing it, through what she calls speech act theory.¹⁵²

Cho highlights that the premise of speech act theory is that to say something is to do something.¹⁵³ That means a speaker is not just creating sounds and words, but performing an action in the form of language.¹⁵⁴ She argues that language and action are on the same terms, and that the power of language is executed in accordance with the content of the language; therefore language itself creates new reality.¹⁵⁵

John Austin, philosopher of language and developer of the theory of speech acts, organises the performative, reality-creating aspects of language into three categories, or acts, that are helpful when it comes to understanding speech act theory.¹⁵⁶ They are the *locutionary act*, the *illocutionary act*, and the *perlocutionary act*.¹⁵⁷ The

¹⁵¹ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 867-868.

¹⁵² Cho, "For the Church Community," *Dialog*, 15.

¹⁵³ Cho, "For the Church Community," *Dialog*, 15.

¹⁵⁴ Cho, "For the Church Community," *Dialog*, 15.

¹⁵⁵ Cho, "For the Church Community," *Dialog*, 15.

¹⁵⁶ J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 2d ed, The William James Lectures Delivered in Harvard University in 1955 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 94-109.

¹⁵⁷ Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 94-109.

locutionary act is the act of speech where something is presented at the level of vocabulary or grammar, and only refers to a propositional meaning within an utterance.¹⁵⁸ The illocutionary act is the act of saying meaning, it is the weight of the utterance to do something or cause an effect, and the perlocutionary act links the response of the listener to the utterance of the speaker, or is what we achieve by saying something.¹⁵⁹

Cho gives a helpful example from biblical text of how these three separate acts work and their place within speech act theory. She uses Matthew 4:17, which states 'repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'¹⁶⁰ She highlights that the locutionary act of this verse is the propositional meaning of these words themselves, which is simple information, stating to repent as the kingdom is at hand.¹⁶¹ However, the illocutionary act of this verse is the meaning of warning conveyed behind the proposition to repent.¹⁶² In other words, there are no propositional words in this verse saying to be warned, but the clear inference is to be warned. Therefore, Cho highlights that the perlocutionary act of this verse is that the hearer (or in this case, the reader) heeds the warning, or the illocutionary act, and repents.¹⁶³ Cho highlights that through this written verse, even though Jesus is no longer physically here on earth saying this statement, his locutionary words given create an illocutionary message of warning that hopefully creates a perlocutionary response within the reader in the contemporary world.¹⁶⁴ Cho highlights that this event of Jesus' words is not constrained by time, as

¹⁵⁸ Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 94-109.

¹⁵⁹ Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 94-109.

¹⁶⁰ Cho, "For the Church Community," *Dialog*, 16.

¹⁶¹ Cho, "For the Church Community," *Dialog*, 16.

¹⁶² Cho, "For the Church Community," *Dialog*, 16.

¹⁶³ Cho, "For the Church Community," *Dialog*, 16.

¹⁶⁴ Cho, "For the Church Community," *Dialog*, 16.

a past locution act is continuously creating a perlocutionary act in the reality of the present world.¹⁶⁵

Cho argues that for these reasons, worship where the Word of God is proclaimed should be no different regardless of the proclamation being in person or online.¹⁶⁶ If the speech act of God, the bible, is proclaimed, it performs an illocutionary act according to the content of what is proclaimed and therefore creates an ideal perlocutionary act of worship within the listener.¹⁶⁷ God's presence with and communication with the Christian is in these perlocutionary acts that come from the locutionary Word of God. This Word of God is already distanced from a contemporary reader by roughly two thousand years, so what does it matter if it is conveyed in person or online? Cho argues that the proper perlocutionary response to the Word of God is independent of whether the Word is proclaimed in person or online.¹⁶⁸

The summary of Cho's argument for speech act theory is that speech act causes a language event which transcends time and space which invites the listener to participate in response. Just as distance and time are not barriers to the ancient words of the bible communicating a message to and eliciting a response from Christians today, distance and time barriers created by church being online rather than in person should also not be an issue.

¹⁶⁵ Cho, "For the Church Community," *Dialog*, 16.

¹⁶⁶ Cho, "For the Church Community," *Dialog*, 16.

¹⁶⁷ Cho, "For the Church Community," *Dialog*, 16.

¹⁶⁸ Cho, "For the Church Community," *Dialog*, 16-17.

Finally, it is important to examine the aforementioned functions of a church in the context of an online space and determine whether an online church is able to function as a church. To restate the aforementioned functions of a church as highlighted by Grudem, the church has a ministry to God, which is right and proper worship, a ministry to believers, through nurturing them in the faith, and a ministry to the world, through evangelism and mercy.¹⁶⁹ Can an *ekklēsia* today carry out these faithful ministries primarily from an online space?

The arguments point to yes. While it is widely understood that the distinctive marks of a church are preaching of the word and due administration of the sacraments,¹⁷⁰ while in this time of COVID-19 it is perhaps worth focusing on the functions of the church rather than the marks of the church. Chase Kuhn, lecturer in theology and ethics and director of the Centre for Christian Living at Moore Theological College tackles this in an article from March 2020. He highlights key theological truths about the church and why we are able to carry out our function as the church even when we are unable to meet in person.

Firstly, Kuhn highlights that the primary part of our identity as Christians and as churches is in Christ.¹⁷¹ Jesus establishes who we are, and therefore we gather together as Christians in union because of our first union with Jesus, and that this union with Jesus is celebrated through the sacraments.¹⁷² Kuhn argues that understanding the order of these unions is important because it means our union with

¹⁶⁹ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 867-868.

¹⁷⁰ Chase R. Kuhn, "The Church in a Time of Pandemic: Are We Still the Church If We Can't Meet?," *The Gospel Coalition Australia*, March 26, 2020, accessed December 7, 2021, <https://au.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-church-in-a-time-of-pandemic-are-we-still-the-church-if-we-cant-meet/>.

¹⁷¹ Kuhn, "Are We Still the Church If We Can't Meet?," *The Gospel Coalition Australia*.

¹⁷² Kuhn, "Are We Still the Church If We Can't Meet?," *The Gospel Coalition Australia*.

Jesus is not nullified because of an inability to gather with one another and administer the sacraments.¹⁷³ In other words, he is arguing that the union we have with Jesus is celebrated in the sacraments with the church, not created by attendance to church and participation in the sacraments. Our identity isn't a member of church that participates in gathering and sacraments, but in being part of the people of God.

Secondly, Kuhn highlights that our lives are therefore defined by the Word of God. He states that 'the definitive marker of our life together is hearing God's word - the word that saves us and tells us who we are by the grace and mercy of God.'¹⁷⁴ More than the markers of our Christian lives being any of the markers traditionally associated with church, our lives as Christians are first and foremost marked by who God says we are. It is through this lens that we can see that while the marks of church may not be being fulfilled, specifically through visible application of communion and baptism, the functions of church can be fulfilled online. Through online discourse we are more than able to worship God and preach his word, through online relationships we are able to nurture and encourage one another, and through open online invitation we are able to evangelise to the world.

Finally, Kuhn highlights that we have a mutual dependence on other Christians.¹⁷⁵ He argues that Christian growth requires relationship with other Christians; we don't grow as Christians just by receiving, but also by giving, by participation.¹⁷⁶ Kuhn

¹⁷³ Kuhn, "Are We Still the Church If We Can't Meet?," *The Gospel Coalition Australia*.

¹⁷⁴ Kuhn, "Are We Still the Church If We Can't Meet?," *The Gospel Coalition Australia*.

¹⁷⁵ Kuhn, "Are We Still the Church If We Can't Meet?," *The Gospel Coalition Australia*.

¹⁷⁶ Kuhn, "Are We Still the Church If We Can't Meet?," *The Gospel Coalition Australia*.

argues that because of this dependence, even when we cannot gather in person, it is ideal to seek out opportunities to meet with other Christians online.¹⁷⁷

Rather than focusing on an inability to administer the sacraments as we were once able, perhaps it is helpful to focus on the core of what church is and what we are still able to do online; reinforcing our primary identity in Christ, which exists regardless of whether or not we are able to celebrate it through the sacraments, living lives defined by the Word of God, ensuring we have solid biblical teaching and discussion in online spaces, and participation, focusing on our mutual dependence on other Christians, using online avenues to pursue relationships.

Therefore: How Should We Gather?

Based on all the above arguments, there seem to be no major issues preventing churches from congregating online in the context of a pandemic such as COVID-19. The idea that there is a biblical *directive* to gather has been disproved, along with any impetus to engage in civil disobedience and gather despite any lockdown orders. Reflections from past theologians on plague ethics show that perhaps it is more appropriate to focus our resistance on the disease itself rather than against the systems of government that are seeking to limit the spread of disease. It can also be seen that no special presence beyond Jesus' omnipresence exists when we gather, but rather when we gather in Jesus' name with consensus, we carry the representative authority of Jesus. Overall, while there are barriers when we gather online and our ability to engage in sacraments (and thus display the marks of being a church) is limited, the

¹⁷⁷ Kuhn, "Are We Still the Church If We Can't Meet?," *The Gospel Coalition Australia*.

core of who we are in Jesus, what we believe, and our commitment to growing together through mutual discipleship is able to be preserved in alternative online forms of gathering.

In the presence of a pandemic such as COVID-19, especially when it has been proven that in areas where the church has continued to gather there has been a greater spread of the disease, churches should seriously consider what exactly their commitment to gathering looks like. There persists no argument to continue to physically gather in the face of lockdown orders, and online services can function as a creative substitution. In seriously considering our charge to love our neighbours and our community, in the presence of a pandemic, it is not only acceptable but perhaps loving for churches to move into online spaces.

Conclusion

Who but God truly knows how long the COVID-19 pandemic shall continue to have ramifications? As the often repeated refrain goes, perhaps we have simply entered a new normal. What is normative has changed, and thus we have experienced a paradigm shift across all of society.

COVID-19 continues to evolve, even at the end of 2021, prompting many more discussions beyond what gathering could and should look like with the advent of social distancing. Face masks and their implementation has sparked debate. Vaccination has seemingly almost split society, with questions arising around restrictions on freedoms for the unvaccinated and their validity if it is for the cause of the greater health of the community. These, and other issues surrounding COVID-19 all make up part of the paradigm shift that society has experienced and is continuing to experience, (who knows what 2022 and beyond will bring?) but these issues are outside the scope of this thesis.

When I set out on this journey of examining the key theme of gathering and what it means in the context of COVID-19, I originally thought I was going to come to a very different conclusion. Personally, I first became Christian in a comparatively conservative church and without any research, my initial thoughts leaned towards almost the opposite conclusion that this thesis has arrived at; I have been pleasantly surprised by the outcome of this research and how it has changed my own views.

The scope of this thesis was to critically examine the topic of gathering, specifically as a church, in the face of social distancing restrictions that are implemented as health directives for the sake of the community. As mentioned, many churches had to make snap decisions regarding their response to lockdown and did not experience the luxury of time to ruminate upon and come to a conclusion. Some churches have elected to defy lockdown orders as an act of obedience to God, while others have elected to obey lockdown orders as an act of love to those around us. In attempting to respond, this essay examined three key areas: the crisis at hand, key ideas around the church based on the early *ekklēsia*, and a deeper examination of what it means for Christians to gather, specifically regarding whether we are explicitly commanded to do so.

COVID-19 is rightly called a crisis, but within that crisis comes both dangers and opportunities. The data has shown a general trend away from church attendance and engagement as the pandemic continues. Church leaders should be rightly cognisant of these trends and endeavour to engage people deeply, especially in areas where gathering is not an option due to the virus. The statistics also paint a bleak picture; there is a direct correlation between church attendance and rate of infection. In simply 'doing church,' we have contributed to the spread of a real disease with real consequences. It cannot be understated that people are dying, and some survivors are presenting with ongoing health complications. We, the church, have contributed to that every time we stubbornly opened our doors.

However, it isn't all bleak. The opportunity to reinvent what it is we do presents itself. We are able to reassess mission, worship, and our theology in the face of this virus and 'do church' differently.

In examining the *ekklēsia*, some key ideas presented themselves. One was the tension between the true *ekklēsia* being the invisible community of believers rather than the visual aspects of church; the visible parts of church were argued to just be an aspect of the true, invisible church. Because the nature of the *ekklēsia* is not rooted in its visible trappings, as long as we do not stray from fundamental biblical principles, we are free to alter our expression of church to suit the context we find ourselves in. While there have been some arguments amounting to "*ekklēsia* means assembly and therefore the church must physically assemble," it was demonstrated that *ekklēsia* often referred to the community of all believers, across all of time, rather than any specifically assembled group in one time and space. The biblical case for church both continuing and adapting was presented by examining ecclesiology between the Gospels and Acts, acting as a proof of sorts that as long as we continue in biblical orthodoxy we are free to continue adapting.

In examining the biblical *ekklēsia*, two key ecclesiological principles were found in the early church. They were the people of God being set apart, and those people of God engaging in discipleship. More than the other trappings of church, it was determined that perhaps these should be what we hold onto as central.

Finally, a deep look at the biblical theme of gathering was warranted. It has already been mentioned that churches are free to adapt to contexts as long as they follow fundamental biblical orthodoxy, but what if the act of gathering itself is a biblical directive?

A key argument for gathering was systematically disproved, the argument being that we are commanded to gather by God, that the government has forbidden us from gathering, and that we ought to obey God over humanity and gather anyway. It was shown that Hebrews 10:24-25 does not in fact contain a biblical directive to gather, and the case for civil disobedience was found to be lacking. In fact, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, it has been argued that there are no biblical arguments preventing churches from moving entirely online and in fact there are stronger arguments against gathering in the face of lockdown laws being imposed. As Christians we are called to resistance against disease, not resistance against the health directives that are limiting the disease!

If any church leaders are still undecided on whether their churches ought to gather in the face of further COVID-19 variants and future lockdowns, it is my sincere hope that the arguments presented in this essay both encourage churches to lovingly close their doors and move online and remove any burden of guilt felt for not 'obeying God' and keeping the doors open.

One final question remains. If the cessation of in person gathering and the shift to online gathering is embraced by churches, as this thesis argues for, then what about after COVID-19? Why should churches ever meet in person again? Are online communities an indefinite acceptable substitute?

First, it should be noted that all the arguments presented in this thesis have been in light of the paradigm shift brought about by COVID-19 and the advent of social distancing. In other words, the *context* has served to shape the response. Future

contexts, as unknown as they are today, should serve to shape future responses. In a context where in person gatherings are optimal, then of course in person church should be encouraged! Adapting to one context today is not an excuse for ignoring a different context tomorrow.

Secondly, and speaking as both a Christian congregant and a pastor, there is an ineffable quality to in person church. As much as I prefer catching up with a friend in person, over coffee, to a phone conversation, I find I also prefer gathering in person. I assume I am not alone in this feeling, and a simple glance at the landscape of dialogue on the topic confirms this. In no way am I advocating for the cessation of in person gatherings; rather I am calling Christians to seriously consider their imperative to gather 'no matter what,' and to dare to be honest with themselves - are they advocating to gather in defiance of lockdown restrictions because they truly believe that is what God wants, or is it actually their own desires they are acting upon? Perhaps, in love for others, and in love for our communities, we can elect to stay home, for a time, and connect online.

I am reminded of an illustration once heard in church of a husband who was drafted overseas to war. As good married partners should, he ensured that communication remained central in his marriage with his wife, and ensured he sent letters as often as frequently possible back home. Of course, remaining in person would have been preferable, but in the context the husband found himself in, letters were an acceptable and appropriate alternative form of communication. Perhaps moving church online is much the same. One day, the husband will come home from the war. At that point, should he continue to send letters to his wife, when he is able to live with her? The

notion seems foolish. Likewise, when we are free from the context of COVID-19, the acceptable and appropriate alternative forms of church may no longer be needed.

However, opportunities abound with fresh expressions of church and new ways to engage with people and grow the kingdom that were not even being considered before COVID-19. While we long to be reunited, like the husband and wife after the war, and should be excited at the prospect of no more lockdowns, I also cannot help but be excited for the innovations and kingdom growth that are sure to come in the interim.

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