

ONLINE CHURCHES AND CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY: DOES CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP REQUIRE EMBODIED PRESENCE?

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This paper will attempt to accomplish three things. First, this paper will outline how society has arrived at a place where virtual community and online churches exist. Second, this paper will examine one of the fundamental assumptions that online churches make: that media itself is neutral. Lastly, this paper will attempt to analyze the medium of the internet in order to determine whether Christian community can authentically be expressed through this medium.

How Did We Get Here?

Since the start of the 21st century there has been a shift in the primary medium used for communication. This shift, which began with the invention of the telegraph, is from print based to electronic image based media. The dominance of print media lasted for nearly two hundred years, from the time of Gutenberg's printing press to Morse's telegraph.¹ Since the invention of the telegraph, electronic media has evolved to include television and more recently the internet. Like the printing press, the internet will likely have a major influence on society and the church.

Just as Guttenberg's printing press, the internet has both religious and non-religious uses. As many as 82 million Americans have used the internet for religious purposes; this is nearly two-thirds of all U.S. internet users.² In fact, as many people use the internet for religious purposes as they do for online banking.³

¹ Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 41.

² Stewart M. Hoover, Lynn Schofield Clark, and Lee Rainie, *Faith Online: 64% of wired Americans have used the Internet for spiritual and religious purposes* (Washington, DC: Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2004), 2.

³ Elena Larsen, *Wired churches, Wired temples: Taking congregations and missions into cyberspace* (Washington, DC: Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2000), 6.

Currently, most statistics show that the use of the internet for religious purposes acts as a supplement, not a substitute, to offline religious practices.⁴ For example, “As a group, these 82 million people are devout and more likely to be connected to religious institutions and practices than other Internet users.”⁵ Furthermore, those who most actively use the internet for religious purposes are also the most active offline religious participants.⁶

While for many people online religious activity acts as a supplement to offline religion, there are a growing number of people that are beginning to use the internet as a replacement for offline religion. This divide is mostly generational. While electronic technology complements face to face communication for many in the Baby Boomer generation, it acts more as a replacement for face to face communication among younger generations like Generation X, The Net Generation, and Generation Next.⁷

This difference stems from the fact that many Baby Boomers were well into adulthood before the internet became widespread, while younger generations were born into this technology.⁸ As a result, those who are ages 11-31 spend upwards of 30 hours a week online.⁹

Additionally, the internet is rapidly replacing television as the dominant medium in society, especially among the Net Generation.¹⁰ Furthermore, traditional phone usage is also being replaced by internet technology, which includes text messaging, Facebook messaging,

⁴ Hoover, Clark, and Rainie, *Faith Online*, 3.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Elena Larsen, *CyberFaith: How Americans Pursue Religion Online* (Washington, DC: Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2001), 3.

⁷ Don Tapscott, *Grown Up Digital: How the Net Generation is Changing Your World* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2009), 16. Those in Generation X were born between January 1965 and December 1976; the Net Generation were born between January 1977 and December 1997; Generation Next were born between January 1998 and the present. *Grown Up Digital* is the continuation of Tapscott’s book *Growing up Digital*. Don Tapscott, *Growing Up Digital: The Rise of the Net Generation* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1998).

⁸ Ibid., 17.

⁹ Ibid., 42.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Skype, GTalk, and AIM.¹¹ The result is that those in the Net Generation have moved to communicating largely through electronic media.

Not only are people communicating online, millions are attempting to have community online. For example, there are more than 800 million users currently on Facebook participating in this online community.¹² As of 2009, “Facebookers around the world were using the site up to three billion minutes a day.”¹³

Facebook allows people to think of the internet in terms of facilitating community not just communication. As a result, there is a shift in how community is being defined. Douglas Groothuis notes, “Community was once reserved for persons closely associated geographically and culturally. Cyberspace technologies, however, have pushed the concept of community beyond these physical limits.”¹⁴ These new technologies have changed the very nature of what it means to be in community with others.¹⁵

Online Churches

Churches have responded to the increase use of the internet by increasing their presence online. In fact, there are some churches that now exist exclusively online through Second Life, an online virtual community.¹⁶

When discussing online churches, it is important to make a few distinctions. Because of the prevalence of the internet almost every church has some presence online. Pastors have email

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² <http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?factsheet> (accessed November 13, 2011).

¹³ Jesse Rice, *The Church of facebook: How the Hyperconnected Are Redefining Community* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2009), 74.

¹⁴ Douglas Groothuis, *The Soul in Cyber-Space* (Grand Rapids: BakerBooks, 1997), 125.

¹⁵ Gene Edward Veith Jr., and Christopher L. Stamper, *Christians in a .com World: Getting Connected Without Being Consumed* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2000), 49

¹⁶ Andree Robinson-Neal notes, “Second Life, the product of California-based Linden Lab, came online publicly in 2003 and boasts of an active variety of communities including clubs, casinos, stores and malls, education facilities, and churches. These virtual communities are created and maintained by real-world people who appear (virtually) in Second Life as men, women, mechanized creations, and furry humanoids, collectively known as avatars.” Andree Robinson-Neal, “The Impact of Virtual Worship on the Real World Church Experience,” *Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet 3.1* (2008): 228.

addresses and most churches have websites. Furthermore, many churches upload videos of their services or podcast their sermons.

Although most churches have an online presence this does not make them online churches. J.K Hadden and D.E. Cowan distinguish between the two; they note that religion online “Provides the interested web traveler with information about religion: doctrine, polity, organization, and belief; service and opportunities for service; religious books and articles; as well as other paraphernalia related to one’s religious tradition.”¹⁷ In contrast, online churches are those that “invite the visitor to participate in the religious dimension of life via the Web; liturgy, prayer, ritual, mediation, and homiletics come together and function with the e-space itself acting as a church.”¹⁸

Within the category of online churches it is important to distinguish whether or not they use virtual technology.¹⁹ Online churches that do not use virtual technology post their old video feed from previous live services or simulcast a live service from a physical location on the internet. Most of these churches have an online campus pastor along with some low tech means through which the congregants are able to communicate with one another, like the use of instant messenger. Furthermore, many of these churches are connected to a physical church.²⁰

In contrast, many online churches are beginning to use virtual technology. Virtual technology enables congregants to interact through online avatars. There are some who believe that virtual technology mediates more authentic community than the text based interactions used

¹⁷ J.K. Hadden, and D.E. Cowan, “The Promised Land or Electronic Chaos? Towards Understanding Religion on the Internet,” In *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospectus and Promises* (Amsterdam: JAI Press, 2000), 9.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ For a detailed explanation of this distinction see Douglas Estes, *SimChurch: Being the Church in the Virtual World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009).

²⁰ There are many churches that are moving to this model. For example, Saddleback Church now has an online campus to go along with their physical locations. See <http://saddleback.com/blogs/internetcampus/>.

by some online churches.²¹ Typically, those that use virtual technology are not connected to a physical church; they exist completely in cyberspace. Instead of watching simulcast sermons that are broadcast from a physical location these services are done completely online. This includes a pastor preaching and interacting through an online avatar. Most of these churches can be found on Second Life.²²

The possibility to reach millions with the gospel is the primary argument put forth in defense of online and virtual churches.²³ The internet is seen as the next great mission field, with many online churches describing the online community as a neighborhood of lost people in need of a church.²⁴

Additionally, many online churches believe the internet can restore the breakdown of community. Samuel Ebersole and Robert Woods note this sentiment:

The growth of computer networking, the Internet, and the World Wide Web (WWW) has been accompanied by an increased interest in the idea that these communication networks can facilitate community. Online communities are said to be springing up in every corner of the “Net,” promising to restore the intimacy that was believed to have been lost through technological advance first introduced by writing and later by print.²⁵

The belief that community can be mediated through the internet assumes that embodied presence is not necessary for authentic community. Along with this assumption comes a more fundamental assumption; the assumption that media are neutral.

²¹ Estes, *SimChurch*, 72.

²² A search of the word “church” on Second Life’s website returned 526 results. See http://search.secondlife.com/web/search/?q=church&s=secondlife_com&m=N&lang=en-US (accessed November 13, 2011).

²³ Geoff Surratt, Greg Ligon, and Warren Bird, *Multi-Site Church Road Trip* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 94.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 91.

²⁵ Samuel E. Ebersole, and Robert Woods, “Virtual Community: Koinonia or Compromise? – Theological Implications of Community in Cyberspace,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 31, no. 2 (2001): 185.

Are Media Neutral?

A neutral view of media believes that changes in methods do not bring about changes to what is being communicated, or affect those doing the communicating.²⁶ Such a view assumes that what is done face to face can just as well be done online. A neutral view of media sees media essentially like a pipeline or conduit.²⁷

As an example, Geoff Surratt, in *The Multi-Site Church Revolution*, defends simulcast preaching by putting forth a neutral view of media. Surratt states, “I was connecting to the content; the container didn’t really matter.”²⁸ In an article written Simon Jenkins, the creator of one of the first publicized Second Life churches, Jenkins also assumes a neutral view of media. Jenkins states, “Just as the Methodist church leader John Wesley took his preaching out of churches and into the fields and streets in the 18th century, we wanted to take church to where people are in the 21st century – on the Net.”²⁹ Both of the previous statements assume that the church can be mediated through different media without any fundamental changes taking place. By overlooking the effects of media, online churches underestimate the influence the medium of the internet has on authentic community.

Media Ecology

The field of media ecology disputes the idea that media are neutral. Media ecology was developed in the middle of the 20th century to analyze the impact of media on society, apart from the specific content of the media.³⁰ Media ecology argues that media do three things. First, media

²⁶ Shane Hipps, *The Hidden Power of Electronic Culture: How Media Shapes Faith, the Gospel, and Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 29.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 38.

²⁸ Geoff Surratt, Greg Ligon, and Warren Bird, *Multi-Site Revolution: Being One Church in Many Locations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 164.

²⁹ Simon Jenkins, “Rituals and Pixels: Experiments in Online Church,” *Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet 3.1* (2008): 101.

³⁰ Some of the major works on media ecology are: Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964); Harold Innis, *The Bias of Communication* (Toronto:

communicate something along with the content that is communicated. Second, media bring ecological changes to society. Lastly, media affect not only society, but the individuals using a particular medium.

Marshall McLuhan, the father of media ecology, viewed media forms as having such influence he coined the phrase “the medium is the message.”³¹ This means that the medium itself has an ability to communicate. Similar to McLuhan’s idea, Neil Postman argues that each medium has a bias of content.³² For example, print based media is biased towards communicating logical, deductive content, which the television is not as well equipped to communicate, with its time restrictions of thirty minutes to an hour and its focus on the image. Similarly, Tim Challies explains, “every technology has imbedded deep within it some kind of ideology . . . ideas that lie behind every technology that will make their way known over time.”³³

University of Toronto Press, 1951); Walter Ong, *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967); Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin, 1986); Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1934); Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society* (New York: Knopf, 1964); Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early Modern Europe, Vols. I and II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Joshua Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1985).

³¹ For the use of this phrase see Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964). Marshall McLuhan was a professor at the University of Toronto and was known for his work on how media influenced society. McLuhan held a Ph.D. from Cambridge in English Literature, and received ten honorary doctorates in his lifetime. Between 1965 and 1975 no other figure in popular culture held more sway regarding media than Marshall McLuhan. In one week in the year of 1967 he was the feature story in Newsweek and Life magazine. Some of McLuhan’s major works are: Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Message: An Inventory of Effects* (New York: Bantam Books, 1967); Marshall McLuhan and Eric McLuhan, *Laws of Media: The New Science* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988); Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962).

³² Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 84. Neil Postman was a cultural critic and communication theorist who wrote extensively in the field of media ecology. Postman founded the first ever program for media ecology at New York University. Some of Postman’s major works are: Neil Postman, *The Disappearance of Childhood* (New York: Vintage Books, 1982); Neil Postman, *Building a Bridge to the 18th Century* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999); Neil Postman, *Conscientious Objections: Stirring Up Trouble About Language, Technology, and Education* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988); Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).

³³ Tim Challies, *The Next Story: Life and Faith after the Digital Explosion* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 37.

Essentially, media have built in values.³⁴ The medium of Twitter can be used as another example. Twitter is an online social networking service that allows its users to post 140 character tweets.³⁵ Twitter has a bias towards short, efficient messages, because of the 140 character restriction and the overall nature of the medium. This bias restricts the type of content a person can communicate through Twitter.

According to Marshall McLuhan, societies are shaped just as much by the medium used to communicate as they are by the content of the communication.³⁶ For this reason, media ecology argues that each medium introduced to society brings ecological change to that society. It is not the old society plus the new medium.³⁷ Shane Hipps explains why the term ecology is used:

As we begin to perceive the power of media regardless of the message, we soon discover that the metaphor of media forms as conduits or containers is not adequate. Instead, it is more helpful to borrow a principle from the environmental science of ecology. The principle of ecology refers to the ways in which environments change and adapt. For example, imagine two adjacent rooms separated by a wall. In one room the temperature is 20 degrees; in the adjacent room the temperature is 90 degrees. If the dividing wall is removed, the two temperatures are blended to form a completely new climate. In the same way, communication media often serve to remove the walls of time and distance. As a result, formerly separate worlds collide, creating entirely new cultural ecologies.³⁸

In addition to ecological effects, media also have biological effects.³⁹ Media change people. For example, the introduction of the printing press during the Reformation changed the way people think. Neil Postman describes it like this; “The Bible became an instrument to think

³⁴ John Dyer, *From the Garden to the City: The Redeeming and Corrupting Power of Technology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011), 96.

³⁵ See <http://twitter.com/>.

³⁶ Marshall McLuhan, and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Message: An Inventory of Effects* (New York: Bantam Books, 1967), 8.

³⁷ Dyer, *From the Garden to the City*, 16.

³⁸ Hipps, *The Hidden Power Of Electronic Culture*, 40.

³⁹ Tim Challies uses this term “biological” to describe how media change people. See Tim Challies, *The Next Story: Life and Faith After the Digital Explosion* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 44-46.

about, but also an instrument to think with.”⁴⁰ The way people began to think and learn was shaped by the medium of print introduced by the printing press. John Dyer explains why media have biological effects on its users:

Our brains work just like our muscles; when we perform a mental task repeatedly, our neural pathways rewire themselves to become better at that task. For example, people who spend long hours reading books with complex ideas tend to become good at that activity. Likewise, people who spend their days consuming small pieces of information such as text messages or status updates tend to have minds particularly suited to performing that task.⁴¹

Along with the proponents of media ecology, the Bible seems to make a distinction between media, which would mean it does not hold to a neutral view of media. For example, the apostle John recognizes that what can be done through one medium cannot necessarily be done through another medium. There are two instances when John seems to prefer the nature of embodied presence over the medium of print. In 2 John 12, he says, “I have much to write you, but I do not want to use paper and ink. Instead, I hope to visit you and talk with you face to face, so that our joy may be complete.” John recognizes that writing to someone is different than talking with them face to face. This reality should lead online churches to ask an important question: “what, if anything, is lost when human beings relate to each other by way of teletechnology?”⁴² This paper will now look at the internet and Christian *koinonia*. Does the medium of the internet allow it to authentically mediate Christian community online?

Does Community Require Presence?

When it comes to having Christian *koinonia* online, most online churches do not provide theological justification for such *koinonia*. They simply assume that *koinonia* can be mediated online without becoming something fundamentally different than biblical *koinonia*. The only

⁴⁰ Neil Postman, *The Disappearance of Childhood* (New York: Vintage Books, 1982), 34.

⁴¹ Dyer, *From the Garden to the City*, 37.

⁴² Hubert L. Dreyfus, *On the Internet* (London: Routledge, 2001), 52.

book length theological defense of online Christian community is the book, *SimChurch: Being the Church in the Virtual World*, by Douglas Estes.⁴³

Estes defines a virtual church as “a virtually localized assembly of the people of God dwelling in meaningful community with the task of building the kingdom.”⁴⁴ Estes argues that there is no reason to deny the authenticity of virtual community; “the everyday *koinonia*, or intimate community, referred to in Acts 2 is possible and even commonplace in virtual churches.”⁴⁵ In fact, Estes argues that there are times when virtual community is more authentic than embodied community, especially among the Millennial generation (those born between 1982-2001).⁴⁶

In the New Testament *koinonia* can refer to “fellowship, association, community, communion, joint participation and intercourse.”⁴⁷ Yet, “The root idea of *koinonia* is ‘taking part in something with someone.’”⁴⁸

The foundation for *koinonia* is the “the common life shared by all believers on the ground that they all, by their calling as Christians, participate in Jesus Christ.”⁴⁹ Therefore, it must be noted that community is created by God not humanity. As Ralph Martin notes, “It is not a collection of folk associated because they share a common interest in religion, but the society or fellowship – or even body – of those whom God has called into *koinonia* with Himself through His Son and in Him with one another.”⁵⁰ The believer’s *koinonia* with God, Christ, and the Holy

⁴³ Douglas Estes, *SimChurch: Being the Church in the Virtual World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁴⁷ Joseph H. Thayer, *Thayer’s Greek-Lexicon of the New Testament* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2007), 352.

⁴⁸ Ralph P. Martin, *The Family and the Fellowship: New Testament Images of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 36.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

Spirit, enables and provides a foundation for *koinonia* with one another (1 John 1:3; 1 Cor 1:9; 2 Cor 13:14).⁵¹

Through faith in the gospel people are brought into community with God and one another. All Christians are adopted into the same family and are all baptized into one body (Gal 3:26; 1 Cor 12:12–13). This is the community that God creates. However, in light of this community, Christians are commanded to express and be in community with one another. This is the imperative of community.

This paper does not want to question the community that God has created through the gospel in online or virtual churches. If members of online churches have placed their faith in Jesus Christ they surely have community with God and one another. What is in question is this: can the internet provide a legitimate means through which to express and maintain the community that God has created through the gospel?

Sharing

Immediately apparent in Acts, as an implication and expression of *koinonia*, is the sharing of goods. This sharing of goods is “an outward expression of their sharing in divine things: this community of material possessions stemmed from the *koinonia* of Christ.”⁵² Furthermore, the New Testament uses *koinonia* to express the sharing of material needs more than any other usage.⁵³ John Hammett notes, “Serving one another in terms of the practical, material needs of life is an expression of fellowship.”⁵⁴

Concerning the sharing of material needs through the medium of the internet, there are obvious limitations. Using Neal Postman’s terminology, it is fair to say that the internet has a

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² J. G. Davies, *Members One of Another: Aspects of Koinonia* (London: A.R. Mowbay, 1958), 28.

⁵³ John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 234.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

bias towards the non-material. While online relationships provide some avenues for sharing, these are limited compared to the amount that face to face interactions provide. Virtual reality simply does not provide enough tangible ways to share with one another. Furthermore, even when people take advantage of the limited means of sharing provided through the internet, this sharing loses its visible expression, which keeps it from fully picturing the unity that Christians have in Christ.

Gathering

A second visible expression of Christian *koinonia* in the New Testament is the church gathering. In Hebrews 10:25 Paul states, “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing.” Philip Ryken rightly notes, “The first Christians understood that within the communion of the saints, covenant assembly is required.”⁵⁵ One reason covenant assembly is important is because it is a visible expression of the unity that Christians have in Christ (Ephesians 2:11-12).

Online churches are certainly gathering, but it is not reflective of the gathering commanded in the New Testament. Can an avatar sitting across from another avatar in a virtual world picture the unity that Christians have in Christ in the same way that Jews sitting across from Gentiles, or African Americans sitting across from Caucasians, picture the unity that Christians have in Christ? For this reason, Gene Veith is right to note, “It may be ‘meeting’ to log into a Christian chat room, but it is not ‘meeting together.’ The biblical model for the Church is clearly one of actual—not virtual—relationships between its members, being in each other’s presence and in the presence of Christ.”⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Philip Graham Ryken, *The Communion of the Saints: Living in Fellowship with the People of God* (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 2001), 78.

⁵⁶ Gene Edward Veith Jr., and Christopher L. Stamper, *Christians in a .com World: Getting Connected Without Being Consumed* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2000), 159.

Furthermore, the medium of the internet actually seems to have a bias against physical presence. And if this is the case, then it very well could lead to ecological changes in society. With the onset of online community will people feel inclined to be in the physical presence of others? Why physically gather when you can gather online? In terms of this bias against embodied presence, Shane Hipps states, “Digital social networking inoculates people against the desire to be physically present with others in real social networks—networks like a church or a meal at someone’s home. Being together becomes nice but nonessential.”⁵⁷ As evidence of this, Tim Challies notes, “A study from the University of Stanford found that for every hour we spend on our computers, traditional face-to-face interaction falls by nearly thirty minutes.”⁵⁸

Baptism and Communion

Two of the most important visible expressions of the *koinonia* that Christians have are baptism and communion.⁵⁹ Baptism and communion are a celebration of the fact that Christians have fellowship with God and each other.

Baptism is the physical expression of one’s union with Christ and entrance into the body of Christ.⁶⁰ Ryken states, “Since believers are united to Christ through baptism, we are also united to one another through baptism.”⁶¹ Baptism is a visualization of a spiritual reality.⁶²

Online baptism loses the visual significance of one’s death, burial, and resurrection with Christ (Rom 6:3–4). Furthermore, online baptism loses the visible expression of someone entering into the fellowship through the work of Christ. Yes, online church members are baptized

⁵⁷ Shane Hipps, *Flickering Pixels: How Technology Shapes Your Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 115.

⁵⁸ Challies, *The Next Story*, 76.

⁵⁹ Ryken, *The Communion of the Saints*, 83.

⁶⁰ Robert Banks, *Paul’s Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in Their Historical Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 80-82.

⁶¹ Ryken, *The Communion of the Saints*, 30.

⁶² *Ibid.*

into the universal body of Christ; yet, there is no tangible, local body of believers to picture this reality.

In terms of communion, which is based on the word *koinonia*, this is the renewal of what began with baptism. Communion is a physical expression of one's union with Christ and fellow believers. In 1 Corinthians 10:16–17 Paul states, “Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.” Based on this, Banks states, “The most visible and profound way in which the community gives physical expression to its fellowship is in the common meal in which the members share.”⁶³ Furthermore, Banks notes, “Thus the meal they shared together not only reminded the members of their relationship with Christ and one another but actually deepened it, much as participation in a common meal by a family or group not only symbolizes but really cements the bond between them.”⁶⁴

Communion, like baptism, loses the richness of its physical expression when it is practiced alone and online. Furthermore, online churches cannot tangibly take of the “one loaf” because physical presence cannot be mediated through the internet.

The Body of Christ and the Church as a Family

The New Testament metaphors for the church are also important for understanding the nature of Christian community. The New Testament describes the church as the body of Christ and as a spiritual family. These metaphors not only describe the community God has created, but they also command community.

⁶³ Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community*, 83.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 86.

One aspect of being the body of Christ is the use of spiritual gifts for the betterment of the body. Kirkpatrick notes, “The *koinonia* brought together a variety of individual gifts, as Paul notes on more than one occasion. But these gifts are to be exercised for the community itself, for its common good (Acts 4:32 and 1 Cor. 12:7). To convey the unity of the community Paul invokes the image of the body with its many organs and functions.”⁶⁵ Moreover, Davies notes,

The spiritual gifts are therefore to be understood in terms of the *koinonia*, i.e. in terms of the fellowship of believers who share in the Spirit—the Spirit’s presence being revealed by the gifts of which he is the source: the gifts, in their turn, being bestowed in order that the *koinonia* might develop to its maturity, its members being thereby more closely knit the one to the other and progressively refashioned in Christlikeness.⁶⁶

Can the whole spectrum of the gifts in the body of Christ be utilized without physical presence? It seems the medium of the internet limits the gifts that are used in online churches. The result is that online churches may lack maturity because only a few people will be able to actively use their gifts for the building up of the body.

Another important metaphor for the church in the New Testament is the church as family. Joseph Hellerman in his book, *When the Church Was a Family: Recapturing Jesus’ Vision for Authentic Christian Community*, argues that authentic Christian community requires Christians to place their church family before their natural family. Furthermore, the apostle Paul was particularly fond of using this family imagery to describe believer’s relationships, with at least 274 references in his writings alone.⁶⁷ Regarding Paul’s terminology, Banks states, “All Paul’s ‘family’ terminology has its basis in the relationship that exists between Christ, and as a

⁶⁵ Frank G. Kirkpatrick, *The Ethics of Community* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 16-17.

⁶⁶ Davies, *Members One of Another*, 19

⁶⁷ Joseph H. Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family: Recapturing Jesus’ Vision for Authentic Christian Community* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2009), 77.

corollary the Christian, and God. Christians are to see themselves as members of a divine family.”⁶⁸

While there are times when the internet proves useful in keeping people connected, the internet cannot ultimately sustain familial relationships. It could even be argued that the internet has a bias against these types of relationships. Shane Hipps notes, “Authentic community involves high degrees of intimacy, permanence, and proximity. While relative intimacy can be gained in virtual settings, the experiences of permanence and proximity have all but vanished.”⁶⁹ Similarly, Robert D. Putnam notes, “The poverty of social cues in computer-mediated communication inhibits interpersonal collaboration and trust, especially when the interaction is anonymous and not nested in a wider social context. Experiments that compare face-to-face and computer-mediated communication confirm that the richer the medium of communication, the more sociable, personal, trusting, and friendly the encounter.”⁷⁰ Proponents of online churches are trying to make the internet mediate a type of community that it is not capable of mediating.

One Another Commitments

Ultimately, the expression of *koinonia* requires very serious commitments between members of the church, represented by at least thirty one another commands in the New Testament.⁷¹ Yet, the internet has a bias of efficiency that could actually work against these one another commitments. Deep committed relationships cannot be efficiently maintained. Furthermore, many of these commitments require physical presence in one another’s lives. After an extensive amount of research on people who have been involved in both online and offline community, Heidi Campbell introduces a concept called the “Chocolate Chip Cookie Factor.” Campbell

⁶⁸ Banks, *Pauls Idea of Community*, 54.

⁶⁹ Hipps, *Flickering Pixels*, 114.

⁷⁰ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 176.

⁷¹ Hammett, *Biblical Basics for Baptist Churches*, 36.

created this phrase to make the point that physical presence cannot simply be replaced online. An act like making a friend chocolate chip cookies when they are sad is impossible on the internet.⁷²

Moreover, the internet might have some rather serious long-term effects on the way people interact with one another. Challies notes, “By the time today’s digital native reaches his twenties, he will have spent some 20,000 hours accessing the Internet and 10,000 hours playing video games.”⁷³ As a result, “many young people are actually losing their ability to relate to one another in an offline context . . . Many of our new media technologies are designed for speed and urgency, not for thoughtful reflection and undistracted conversation.”⁷⁴

Conclusion

Ultimately, relating through the medium of the internet and relating face to face are fundamentally different. Hubert L. Dreyfus, in his book, *On the Internet*, notes, “two human beings conversing face to face depend on a subtle combination of eye movements, head motion, gesture, and posture . . . studies suggest that a holistic sense of embodied interaction may well be crucial to everyday human encounters.”⁷⁵ Unfortunately, many online churches fail to see the difference between mediated communication and face to face communication, which has led online churches to believe that the church can do without embodied community.

In closing, it is important to note that there is nothing inherently wrong with using media and technology to further the Great Commission. Yet, as this paper has tried to demonstrate, before Christians use media towards this end they must “take seriously the role of technology and media in our culture and in the church.”⁷⁶

⁷² Heidi Campbell, *Exploring Religious Community Online: We are One in the Network* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 178.

⁷³ Challies, *The Next Story*, 44.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁷⁵ Dreyfus, *On the Internet*, 58.

⁷⁶ Hipps, *Flickering Pixels*, 14.