

## *Church Life After the Crisis*

The chapter heading should, of course, conclude with a question mark: ‘Church Life After the Crisis?’ To state the staggeringly obvious, I don’t know what life in the churches will be like after the crisis. Nor does anybody else. But I know what I fear.

Leaving that for the moment, at the very least we must think about what might happen. Just drifting into the future cannot be an option for believers; in any event, it ought not to be. As I have said, perhaps God has, in part, been using the present crisis to call us to examine our thinking and test our practices against his word. Certainly, there was – and is – a pressing need for both. I, for one, am convinced that we have long-since departed from new-covenant principles.

But I have to admit I fail to detect any sign that the lockdown is making us think seriously about the fundamental essence of church life (as opposed to polishing the way we do it), and that we will take the opportunity it affords to enable us to get back to the New Testament. Quite the reverse! I anticipate that when the lockdown is lifted we will not only rapidly drop back into our old ways, but shall find ourselves even more deeply entrenched than we were in the pattern set by Christendom. I strongly suspect, alas, that F.F.Bruce’s observation will prove only too true in this matter:

Some institutions are allowed to grow so old and venerable that the idea of scrapping them is unthinkable sacrilegious.<sup>1</sup>

I fear we shall find the same as Paul did at Corinth. In 1 Corinthians 8:7, the apostle admitted that some believers had become so used to the idea of the spiritual contamination of meat offered to idols which dominated their way of life

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<sup>1</sup> F.F.Bruce: *A Mind For What Matters: Collected Essays*, Wm.B.Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, 1990, p241.

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before they were converted that they just could not shake off the thought, however carefully he taught them the principles of the new covenant. Thus here. Many are so wedded to the institutional, Christendom idea of church life, that nothing will shake them. What ‘we’ do is what the New Testament saints did. Full stop!

Moreover, I am pretty sure that many will come to like livestreaming. So popular will it prove, that while internet activity by the churches naturally will not be maintained at its present level, it will be here to stay, and become yet another tool which the church ‘re-engineers’<sup>2</sup> will eagerly grasp to make the church yet more appealing to pagans – ‘the unchurched’, as they prefer to call them. I can picture a blizzard of material to aid churches (and others) in their use of technology, far greater than ever it was before the crisis – and there was no shortage then!<sup>3</sup> And who knows what developments we shall see in that technology in the next few years, with consequent further radical adjustments to the *ekklesia* and its message? The pursuit of professionalism which was already strong before the lockdown will only become more intense. Of one thing I am sure – these ‘advances’ will not be taking us back to the new covenant! Quite the opposite!

When normality returns, churches which livestream in addition to, and at the same time as, their normal ‘church service’, will no doubt be doing so for a number of reasons: to provide for regular attenders who are unable (for some good reason) to ‘attend church’, to tap into the disaffected attenders of other churches, or (and this I suspect will come

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<sup>2</sup> See my *Relationship*.

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, the extensive bibliography in J.Todd Mullins: ‘Online Church: A Biblical Community’, a thesis submitted to Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary, Florida, in 2011; Theweefflea: ‘The Invisible Church, Cyber Theology and Online Baptism’, 19th May 2016; Steven McIntosh (BBC Entertainment reporter): ‘TV in lockdown: How shows are coping without a studio audience’ (BBC News website, 28th April, 2020).

high on the list) to reach ‘the unchurched’. Whichever it is, an increased inclusivism will prove inevitable.

There is another point. I see the drive for technology dovetailing smoothly with the pressure to adapt ‘the presentation of the gospel’ to the culture of the young – those who have been reared in, and live in, the world of technology. This can only mean that the church – the church itself – must be constantly on the *qui vive* to make sure it stays up to date with both the culture and the technology, and keeps adjusting itself and its message to stay ‘with it’.<sup>4</sup> Progress will not be thought of in terms of returning to the New Testament,<sup>5</sup> but in being at the cutting edge of the culture and its technology.

Why am I so pessimistic about this exciting innovation? Before I respond, please do not forget my rider that the churches’ response to the lockdown has not caused the damage to the *ekklēsia* that I complain off, but it has highlighted it; worse, it has encouraged it. It is not the technology’s fault; I am no Luddite – I use the technology myself. And yes, Martin Luther made use of the printing press, newly invented in his day. It is the how and the why of the technology’s use which counts; even more, the impact it will have on what is being broadcast. Livestreaming, alas, emphasises the notion of performance, and this requires a high degree of professional polish.

Not only that. The virtual world carries its own bewitching problems. The church will not be exempt. I use the word ‘bewitching’ advisedly. Many – as I have noted, especially among the young – are already living on social media, and

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<sup>4</sup> As I have already noted, for one modern evangelical’s advocacy of constantly adapting gospel presentation to the culture, see ‘Tim Keller on How to Bring the Gospel to Post-Christian America’.

<sup>5</sup> I realise, of course, that first-century Mediterranean culture was very different from ours. But man is still the same, the gospel is unchanged (or should be), and the *ekklēsia* should remain New Testament.

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not a few observers are seriously concerned at the way many confuse the virtual with the real, mistaking the fantasy world for reality. The advertisers are not short of ideas for driving home this confusion. Take this oxymoron: ‘A website makes it real’. Many delude themselves that film and TV stars, actors, and all the rest, lead the kind of lives they so expertly portray on the screen or stage, when, in many cases, the reality, as we all well know, could hardly be more different.

The virtual has its obvious attractions, of course, but just as a drug prescribed by the physician may ease one problem, it inevitably brings with it its own unwanted side effects.

Watching is easy. Watching a DVD is far easier than reading a classic, looking at a biopic<sup>6</sup> than studying a tome. But there is a danger. The medium imposes changes on the message. So, for example, students are warned against watching a television production of a book they are studying for their examination.

As for preaching, since even audio equipment robs a preacher of power,<sup>7</sup> what the long-term effect of livestreaming will be is anybody’s guess. I would not be surprised if ‘church services’ become more and more just like another TV or Hollywood spectacular. They were heading in that direction before the crisis, but now – who knows? Presentation will be even more securely ensconced in the driving seat. Competition for new attenders will become even fiercer. And this will not be limited by geography. Viewer-numbers will be scrupulously scrutinized, and they will almost certainly be influenced – if not governed – by the quality of the ‘streaming’: the more professional, the more popular.<sup>8</sup> And popularity is king! The popularity – or otherwise – in turn, will affect the

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<sup>6</sup> A dramatisation of the life of a historical character.

<sup>7</sup> See my *Preaching*.

<sup>8</sup> Before the lockdown, churches were being set up which offered more enticing ‘goodies’ or ‘freebies’ than other churches in the area.

production. A vicious circle! Weather forecasters – how serious can you get! – know that they are performers whose performances have to be engaging, energetic and entertaining, with a dash of frivolity.<sup>9</sup> Even when they do not opt for full-blown livestreaming, I suspect churches will yield to the pressure to adopt the necessary expertise, thus rooting even deeper the notion of professionalism in church life. The cult of the ‘superstar’ preacher in the ‘super-league’ – which was already growing stronger by the day – will become the norm.

Whether or not my sense of foreboding will prove justified, ‘production-management’ courses will have to be a priority: from the little that I have seen – some of the output has been toe-curling – advice is sorely needed. It is inevitable: if churches are really serious about the livestreaming of ‘church services’, they will have to learn the techniques and get the necessary polish into their productions, and without delay. Front lighting, back lighting, backdrops, angles, voice production, pace of delivery, camera and microphone quality – the list goes on and on – will all need serious attention – and cash. The staff list of the modern evangelical church will soon be augmented by the post of ‘Stage Manager’, ‘Ambience Arranger’, ‘Head of Technology’, or somesuch equivalent.<sup>10</sup>

It will not be long in coming. The market is there, waiting; the law of supply and demand will kick in. As I write, the floodgates have opened.<sup>11</sup> Even now, the ‘re-engineers’ will be beavering away, producing their manuals; it will not be

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<sup>9</sup> In 1956, when I took my O-level in Geography, I was able to answer the meteorological question by mentally recalling the nightly TV weather forecast I watched, every aspect of which was scientifically correct and formally presented. That would be impossible today.

<sup>10</sup> We might even get a ‘Pastor of Technicians’ to join the Pastoral Board.

<sup>11</sup> Phil Thompson: ‘How to Livestream Your Church Service: A Practical Guide’ (Gospel Coalition website, 12th March 2020).

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long before the opinion-formers among evangelicals will be marking out the route for the majority, and the present drive for sophisticated schemes to make the church attractive to all and sundry will snowball.<sup>12</sup>

All this will only serve to increase the damage to the *ekklēsia*, blurring even further the distinction between the saints and the world.

To make my point, I set you a little test. I have taken this from a website offering advice to would-be livestreamers. But is it offering advice to a local amateur entertainment group or a church? I have replaced the give-away words with square brackets:

If you're trying to attract new visitors, letting them experience [what you offer] online before attending is a good way to help them see if your [group/church] is the right fit...

You need a high enough quality camera so your viewers can see what's going on...

The absolute worst livestreaming mistake your [group/church] can make is not testing out the stream ahead of time. Testing allows you to avoid all... the mistakes... and ensure your [group/church] is capable of streaming...

It's easy to test your livestream without just going live. Host a private viewing party with a handful of members...

There's a reason why [the platform performers] should [prepare well in advance]. It gives them ample time to fine-tune and practice. Of course, rehearsing is just a good practice to have...

Always have ways to measure the results.

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<sup>12</sup> This will be true right across the board. 'Sarah Mullally [the Bishop of London] said... while religious buildings are closed "the Church continues to be open". She added: "Now there is going to be a challenge for us in the future, about asking ourselves why do more people access online than may be coming to our buildings? How do we enable them to enter into our community, to be part of our community in church?"' (Martin Bashir and Harry Farley: 'Coronavirus: Churches may not be back to normal by end of year' BBC News website, 10th May 2020).

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It is, of course, advice to a church.<sup>13</sup>

But what about this? Can there be any doubt that this next piece is talking about ‘entertainment’?

In [church/entertainment], as in [entertainment/church], it’s hard to replicate the live experience on screen. But some are using technology to create a new kind of [service/show].

Although monologues have been filmed in lockdown and pre-recorded [services/shows] have been put online, they often can’t capture the excitement of being in an audience. Plus, the [wonderful gospel/theatre] doesn’t translate well to the screen.

‘What doesn’t work is watching streaming of [services/plays] on computers’, [to quote the warning a famous preacher/playwright gave] last week. ‘Whenever I watch those I just feel lonelier than I felt before. What is interesting is when [churches/producers] start thinking about – what are the... potentials of Zoom’.

In recent weeks, creative types have been exploring just that...

‘I’m fascinated by the format, which is a completely new kind of way of putting on a [service/play] where paradoxically you stay home and live [church/theatre] comes to you’...

Virtual backgrounds and green screens can create settings and effects that would be difficult and expensive in real life.

‘I’m really enjoying it because it feels like a new box of tricks, a new way of telling [the gospel/stories]’...

People have been tuning in from around the world and using the [services/shows] to have a shared [experience] with separated family members...

‘The key has been inviting the audience to bring the [services/shows] to life... They have had that sense of community that [church/theatre] has, where you’re all on the same journey. That’s their main success. I think that’s what people are missing in lockdown – that sense of community’.

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<sup>13</sup> ‘The Biggest Mistakes Churches Make With Livestreaming’.

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Yes, it was taken from an entertainment report.<sup>14</sup> But what's the difference?

It is not that I disagree with the advice or opinions expressed, I hasten to add. No! When it comes to livestreaming, there is little to choose between church services, entertainment shows, TV spectaculars, shopping adverts, and all the rest: professionalism always wins the day. I am not saying the content is the same; it is the need for professionalism I speak of. As I said, the little livestreaming of 'church services' that I have seen, tells me that in many cases advice is sorely needed. But professionalism is a curse when it comes to God's work. In the *ekklesia*, Scripture and the Spirit are joint kings. In the online church, however, a polished presentation is an absolute must.

Alarmist? I am sure the majority, in stark contrast to me, will see all this in a positive light.

Walter P. Wilson, for one. In 2000 – twenty years ago, please note – he was warning stick-in-the-mud churches:

Continue to do the same old things, and you'll get the same old results. Try to see the future. We are moving into a world that requires that we do things very differently. The unchurched will remain unchurched. Don't expect them to show up at your door. Create a network that reaches out to their world, and ask God to begin touching their lives. He will. We need only declare his word. His Spirit will use to maximum influence<sup>15</sup> the internet for the advantage of the kingdom.<sup>16</sup>

Note the assumption that the churches' business is to attract 'the unchurched' into 'church attendance' – whether really or virtually. As for the 'old', Jeremiah faced a similar issue

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<sup>14</sup> Ian Youngs (BBC Entertainment & Arts reporter): 'Coronavirus: How live entertainment is evolving online to be a lifeline' (BBC website 18th May 2020).

<sup>15</sup> Original 'will leverage'.

<sup>16</sup> Walter P. Wilson: *The Internet Church*, Word Publishing, Nashville, 2000, p41.



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in his day – when many preferred a new way (Jer. 6:16). I prefer the ‘old’ way – in the sense of the old gospel, the old *ekklēsia*, the old everything, with the old results of conversion and progressive sanctification – in the sense of the new covenant as made clear in the New Testament.

Here is another sample in the same vein as Wilson. J.Todd Mullins (in 2011) wrote:

Church online [has]... the potential for continual services and prayer rooms to be available around the clock... With the training and deploying of additional service leaders, more and more online services could populate the internet, allowing more people to be reached for Christ... services taking place online 24 hours a day... The opportunity for evangelism not only extends to foreign soil, but also... at home. Many people have an apprehension of walking through the doors of a local church... Church online allows the attendee to observe what a service is like, talk with a pastor, and get an overall feel for the church before they ever step in a building. In some cases the church online becomes a ‘pre-evangelistic’ tool to invite people to church... The church must create online church venues in which young believers can reach their peers with the truth of Christ’s grace and God’s plan for their lives. Church online has the potential to harness their abilities and skill sets and prepare these young believers to share Christ with the online world.<sup>17</sup>

And so on – and on. Note the way in which Mullins linked evangelism and ‘church services’. Do not miss the unmitigated inclusivism of it all. If this takes hold, the *ekklēsia* will no longer be the *ekklēsia*.

Nicky Gumbel of Alpha, having seen swelling numbers of non-churchgoers being made ‘comfortable with church’ online before they cross the threshold of a church, has changed his mind and become enthusiastic about online prospects.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Mullins.

<sup>18</sup> See ‘Nicky Gumbel from Alpha on Why He Changed His Mind About Church Online’.

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Others, however, have sounded warnings. Take, for instance, John Piper (in 2007) and Cameron Buettel (in 2016),<sup>19</sup> though both are heavily into internet use themselves.

Let me go back even further – fifty or sixty years to be precise – to quote D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones. His words have relevance to the issue in hand. How can that be? Whatever could Lloyd-Jones know about the internet, PC's, laptops, tablets or smart phones, livestreaming and all the rest? Nothing, of course! Nevertheless, his words – with suitable updates(!) – are relevant. Mind you, quoting him on the issue inevitably risks a good measure of irony – in the years following his death, Lloyd-Jones has himself been turned into one of the major players (performers?) on the internet, with the Trust which controls his output proudly publishing the number of 'downloads' of his sermons. Moreover, even as he was publishing his diatribe against tape-recordings he was thanking Mrs Burney for transcribing the tape-recordings of his addresses!

Although I have already cited it, I begin with Lloyd-Jones' 1964 paper 'John Calvin and George Whitefield':

Commenting upon [George Whitefield's] style of preaching, [a publisher] said: 'A noble negligence ran through his style'. What does he mean? He means that Whitefield did not sit down and write wonderful literary masterpieces of sermons, with every sentence perfectly balanced, and always finished, and polished and so on. No, he did not do that. He had not got the time to write sermons. He was an extempore preacher, and there was what this man calls 'a noble negligence' in his preaching. He broke the rules of grammar now and again, he did not remember to finish his sentences always, but to those who know anything about preaching, that is nothing. 'Noble negligence!' – oh that we had a little more of it, and a little

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<sup>19</sup> John Piper: 'Is Direct Human Contact Important In Evangelism and Church Life?', 24th Sept. 2007 (His answer was 'Yes'); and Cameron Buettel : 'Grace to You Is Not Your Cyber-Church' (John MacArthur's website, 14th Nov. 2016).

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less of the polished essays that pass for sermons in this our degenerate age!...

The printing of sermons... can have a devastating effect on preaching as such. Men have their eye upon the people who are going to read it rather than on those to whom they are preaching at the time. Concern about reputation and what the literary and pedantic critics will say, alas, comes in.<sup>20</sup>

And now this from Lloyd-Jones, published in 1971:

A new emphasis was placed upon ‘the service’ – what is often called, ‘the element of worship’. Now these terms are very misleading. I remember a man once in a conference saying: ‘Of course we in the Episcopal Churches pay greater attention to worship than you do in the Free Churches’. I was able to point out that what he really meant was that they had a liturgical form of service and we did not. But he equated the reading of the liturgy with worship. So the confusion grows.

Still worse has been the increase in the element of entertainment in public worship... You have a ‘song leader’ [a ‘worship leader’] as a new kind of official in the church, and he conducts the singing [‘worship’] and is supposed to produce the atmosphere... Then... there is the giving of testimonies... particularly if they are important people in any realm. This is said to attract people to the gospel and to persuade them to listen to it. If you can find an admiral or a general or anyone who has some special title, or a baseball player, or an actor or actress or film-star, or pop-singer, or somebody well known to the public, get them to give their testimony... Have you noticed that I have put all this under the term ‘entertainment’? That is where I believe it truly belongs. But this is what the church has been turning to...

To make the list complete I must add tape-recording – as I see it, the peculiar and special abomination at this present time.

There is the pleasure mania, and television and radio bringing their influence right into the home.

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<sup>20</sup> Lloyd-Jones: ‘John Calvin and George Whitefield’ pp122-123.

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When you come to... television video-tapes so that a man may subsequently see his own gestures, and so on, this to me is reprehensible in the extreme. The same applies to instruction in ‘pulpit deportment’ as it is called, or ‘television deportment’. There is only one word for all this; it is sheer prostitution, it is instruction in the art of the prostitute.

It is essential today that something should be said about the whole question of radio and television preaching... It is a live issue for most preachers today. With one or two exceptions, because of very special circumstances, this is something I have refused to do, because I held the view, and still hold it, that these ways of communicating truth have been inimical to true preaching... Indeed I would go so far as to say that since about 1920 or so this has been one of the major factors militating against a belief in preaching. The argument on the other side is generally put in terms of the results that follow, and you will hear wonderful and thrilling stories of people accidentally turning on the radio and suddenly hearing a word which arrested them and led to their conversion. The same applies to television; it is always the argument from results. This question needs to be examined carefully because there are many sides to it. My rooted objection to this modern method is very largely that the service is so controlled.

When you come to evaluate a given method I suggest that you should do so in terms of its total effect upon the life of the church, remote as well as immediate.

Even more serious is the harm [broadcasting – the 1970s equivalent of livestreaming] has done to the people’s idea of the corporate life of the church. Far too often they think of churches just as places where you sit and listen to a sermon; and now you can get this on the radio or on tapes and so on.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> It goes without saying that Lloyd-Jones thought that scriptural church life reached its pinnacle – with hardly any other ‘peak’ anywhere in sight – in people *actually* attending preaching. He was unable to see that, whether virtually or actually, those falls far, far short of *ekklēsia* life.

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We have allowed these outside forces to influence us overmuch; and I suggest [far too weak – DG] it is time for us to break into it all and to try to get back to the New Testament picture of the church.

First and foremost [of the dangers for preachers is] professionalism. That is the greatest of all dangers in the ministry. It is something preachers have to fight as long as they live.

Your preaching... can even become a ‘performance’. Nothing is worse than that... I once heard a man at a big Bible conference in the U.S.A. repeat a sermon at the request of many people... As I listened to that sermon I must confess that the effect it had upon me was not to bring me to see the glory of the Lord or to be grateful; I felt it was a performance that came very near to being blasphemous... Many of the people... clearly thought that it was wonderful. It was certainly clever, a clever sermon, a kind of acrostic; but to me it was a sheer performance... We should never give a performance; we cannot reprobate this too strongly.<sup>22</sup>

That is just a sample of the many thought-provoking things which Lloyd-Jones said on this subject. Alas, as so often with Lloyd-Jones, while men praise his memory, far too few of them actually carry out his teaching.<sup>23</sup> I fear it will be the same here.

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### ***An objection***

But wouldn’t Paul have grasped the present opportunity afforded by digital technology, and, taking full cognisance of contemporary culture – especially, the culture of the young – accommodated himself and the content of his message to

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<sup>22</sup> Lloyd-Jones: *Preaching*.

<sup>23</sup> See for instance, my *Relationship; Dilemma*; ‘Lloyd-Jones for Law Men’ in my *New-Covenant Articles Volume 4*. It reminds me of those who built monuments to the prophets (Luke 11:47) but signally failed to do what they said.

appeal to modern man? After all, we know what he told the Corinthians:

Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings (1 Cor. 9:19-23).

1 Corinthians 9:19-23 can be abused to justify everything and anything in the name of pragmatism, of course, but it surely has its own inbuilt limits.<sup>24</sup> Paul was willing to go as far as he could in not transgressing local taboos in order to reach men with the gospel. He would put up with any personal inconvenience or insult; he wanted to keep himself out of the way, yes. He would go to the synagogue to reach Jews (Acts 9:20; 13:5,14; 14:1; 16:13 (the nearest equivalent); 17:1-2,10,16-17; 18:4,19; 19:8). He would go to the marketplace or the Areopagus to reach pagans (Acts 17:16-34), yes.<sup>25</sup> He was alive to where his hearers were, and where he had to pick them up. All this, beyond question, is true. Certainly! But the idea that he would adopt Jewish or pagan principles, things which made Judaism tick or

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<sup>24</sup> Compare: 'Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus' (1 Thess. 5:18). 'The anointing that you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that anyone should teach you' (1 John 2:27). Surely there is an understood – though unstated – limit in such passages.

<sup>25</sup> See the chapter 'Paul at the Areopagus: The Antithesis of Relationship Evangelism' in my *Relationship*. See also my *Confront*.

paganism thrive, in reaching the lost, is simply absurd and worse.<sup>26</sup>

So... if anybody thinks that 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 justifies adjusting the *ekklēsia* and the gospel in the light of the world's culture to attract pagans and make them feel 'comfortable in church', he has stretched biblical elasticity to new limits. He has stretched it far beyond breaking point. No interpretation of 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 can be right if it unravels Paul's dogmatic determination set out earlier in the same letter (1 Cor. 1:17 – 2:16, and beyond) – his resolution, not only to confront the cultures around him, but staunchly to resist any attempt to impose those cultures upon him, his understanding of the gospel, and his proclamation of it (1 Cor. 2:2).<sup>27</sup>

Specifically, therefore, foisting internet technology on the *ekklēsia* to attract pagans into 'church attendance' in order to be evangelised can only work when Christendom is regarded as 'a good thing'.

Not least of the reasons behind Paul's spelling out his policy was, as he said, so that believers might take the same line (1 Cor. 11:1).

For these reasons, therefore, I remain unconvinced that 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 cuts the ground from under my thesis.

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But my warning, I fear, will count for little. To borrow another's illustration: I have as much hope as a dog of impressing the passengers when barking at an express train as it thunders through the station. Christendom principles, a

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<sup>26</sup> He was not doing that in Acts 21. See my 'Does Acts 21 Confirm Sabbath Keeping for Believers?' in my *New-Covenant Articles Volume 11*. 1 Cor. 9:19-23 does not contradict Paul's confrontational attitude in 1 Cor. 1:18 – 2:16.

<sup>27</sup> For more on this, see the chapter 'What of Scripture?' in my *Relationship*.

culture-led – not Scripture-led – approach to the ungodly, with an increasing dependence on, and accommodation to, internet technology, will prove a threefold cord which will not be easily broken (Eccles. 4:12). 1800 years of hoary tradition, sanctified by an illustrious roll-call of household names through the centuries, especially when buffed up by a digital facility wedded to the culture of the age, will prove pretty intractable.

Nevertheless, although I am very far from sanguine that things will improve (by which I mean get back to the new covenant) when the lockdown is lifted, let me indulge myself in a little day-dreaming, wishing for the moon. Perhaps, as I have said, this crisis has been a wake-up call from the Lord, and perhaps we have been listening, and perhaps we shall come to see that we need to jettison the Christendom concept of ‘a church’ and get back to the New Testament, the new-covenant *ekklēsia*. Perhaps we shall drop the emphasis on the one-man ministry, replacing it by the biblical concept of the one-another ministry. Perhaps we shall turn our backs on the priesthood of *a few* believers, giving ourselves to the priesthood of *all* believers. Perhaps we shall come to see that preaching – all communication – must be four way: pulpit-pew, pew-pulpit, pew-pew, then church-world. Perhaps the emphasis on the individual will give way to the mutual, the corporate. Perhaps participation will replace observation. Perhaps we shall give up the notion that ‘bigger is best; bigger still is better still’.

Quite a few ‘perhaps’ in that paragraph!

Of course, only the Spirit can bring this about,<sup>28</sup> but what a change it would be! If believers could – if believers would –

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<sup>28</sup> I do not want to extrapolate from the extraordinary to the ordinary, but I think it is significant that though the first disciples knew they had to evangelise, they did not dream of inventing clever schemes nor go to the world to get ideas, but knew they had to wait for the Spirit’s power. Christ told them: ‘Repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in [my] name to all



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get back to the new covenant, how greatly it would honour God in the edification of his people! Two birds, if I might be allowed the idiom, with one stone! Instead of going to ‘a service’, our service to God, his people and the world would be 24/7 in everything we think, say and do (1 Cor. 10:31)!<sup>29</sup>

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As I bring this chapter to a close, let me summarise my anxieties.

As I said when I began, the church is not a place. But neither is it a gathering simply to hear a man deliver a monologue. We now have to add that a church is not a gathering to watch a performance.

Yet the strengthening of that notion – ‘a church service’ as a performance by the few, the majority being spectators – is what I foresee as one of the lasting outcomes – casualties – of the lockdown. Will professionalism in the churches win the day? Almost certainly, I fear. The present flurry of activity on the internet will increase the pressure for ‘church services’ to be more professional than ever, more polished, more of a spectacle to be watched, with believers being made even more dependent on such for their spiritual sustenance. Ever since the walls were breached with the momentous televising of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953, nothing has been able to stave off the camera’s prying eye, with its inevitable turning of everything, not

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nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high’ (Luke 24:47-49) And it was when – and only when – the Spirit came upon them that they had the necessary power to begin (Acts 1:4-5,8; 2:1-4,33; 4:31). They were learning by experience the truth of: ‘Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts’ (Zech. 4:6). Nor is it by schemes and programmes, however sophisticated

<sup>29</sup> See my opening illustration (and note) to the chapter: ‘The Church in the New Testament’.

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excluding royalty and politics, into showbiz, with its attendant ‘personalities’ and ‘superstars’. The church will not be – indeed, already *is* not – exempt. The present ‘super-league’ of preachers who have an astronomical number of ‘hits’ will take some to even dizzy heights in the eyes of the many. Nor must we ignore the ‘copycat power’ of the screen: California today, little Snoring tomorrow.<sup>30</sup>

As a consequence, I can foresee the inevitable strengthening of the clergy/laity divide that the Fathers, drawing on the old covenant, brought into the *ekklēsia*. In the evangelical world this divide will not be called such, of course, but that is what it will be – between, on the one hand, the professional performers with their band of whiz-kid technicians and floor managers, and, on the other, the observers; between – not to put too fine a point on it – the entertainers and the entertained. The reinforcing of that is what I envisage, what I fear will be the outcome of this current frenzy of internet activity.

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Conscious that I am sailing against wind and tide, I nevertheless publish this book in hope that it might – just might – make some pause, think – and, if they agree, repent and reform.

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<sup>30</sup> As I write, 13th June, 2020, the crowd’s assault on Edward Colston’s statue in Bristol is being replicated – or attempted – in a rapidly-growing number of other places. Where and when will the storm peter out? Until it does, who and what will be exempt? Who knows? Meat eaters and vegetarians, organic and non-organic advocates, those who wear leather shoes and those who demand synthetic, pacifists and non-pacifists, field-sports fans and animal-rights supporters – the list is never-ending – need to prepare themselves.