"Digital Ecclesiology"

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https://aqueductproject.org

SUMMARY:

Justin Murff opened the conversation with introductory questions and comments, specifically asking what the church is and whether it can be expressed virtually [5-6]. To that end, he noted five basic functions of the church: worship, service, evangelism, fellowship, and discipleship [7]. Murff then introduced two speakers to present briefly on their experiences with online church in the context of the Middle East [10, 14]. The first presenter described "My Home, My Church," which is a model of online church that aids and encourages small groups of believers who meet in homes [12-13]. The second presenter, an Anglican priest who was forced to flee Iran because of religious persecution, described testified how he had been able to preside remotely over a baptismal service by phone call while an assistant administered baptism in Iran [15]. The presenter went on to note that, for online churches to be effective, they will have to find ways to have meaningful fellowship, train leaders, and preform sacraments [16-17].

Murff then began the discussion by asking if a church can truly be virtual [20]. Douglas Estes noted that the Bible uses ninety-six different metaphors to describe the church, and that none of these precludes the possibility of a virtual church [21]. David Han focused the conversation by asking whether or not churches should be virtual [22]. Andrew Sears responded by stating that the answer to Han's question would be different in different contexts, and Han concurred with this clarification [27-28].

Having noted several different modes of online church, ranging from streaming services to assembling in virtual reality [8], Murff further focused the conversation by asking if there were any potential dangers with using an avatar to represent oneself in a virtual reality church [32]. Ali Khalil responded that there is the potential for individuals to use avatars to hide their true identities. Nevertheless, he added that such interactions in an online space could have the potential to lead to more open interactions [33]. Daniel Herron, on the other hand, offered the opinion that avatars may provide individuals with the opportunity to express their true selves more accurately and comfortably [38, 65].

At this juncture in the dialogue, Michael Svigel commented that there had been relatively little challenge to the idea that churches could or should exist online, prompting him to ask if anyone would be willing to reflect further on that question [45]. Tim Williams responded by stating that the church does not exist for itself, but for the world [47]. Thus, while it might be possible for churches to exist organizationally online, and while churches may be able to find a way to perform sacraments digitally, churches must also find ways to respond to the real-world needs around their physical locations [48-49]. Darrell Bock responded that it is possible for online churches to "encourage people to move out into their own communities" [55].

From here, Murff transitioned to begin discussing how sacraments can be performed in an online environment [61]. DJ Soto noted that, in his tradition, sacraments are held to be symbolic, thus allowing one to perform a baptism in a virtual space. Soto noted that the ability to perform baptisms by virtual telecommunication is particularly helpful in the case of medical

conditions that prevent people from leaving their home [63]. Svigel, challenging whether sacraments could be administered online, responded that the gathering of the body of Christ is an important element in both baptism and communion [71, 73-74]. Kranda, in turn, noted that virtual churches can easily encourage small gatherings of believers in a physical space where the sacraments could be performed [78]. Bock went further to say that he did not believe the gathering of the body of Christ had to be limited to a physical space, thus allowing for sacraments to be performed in online gatherings [80]. Finally, after a few concluding remarks, Murff ended the conversation [81]. Tim Clancy closed in prayer [83].

TRANSCRIPT:

[1] Jonathan Armstrong: My name is Jonathan Armstrong. I work at Moody Bible Institute and I'm very grateful for your time and for your engagement today as we discuss virtual ecclesiology. Justin Murff is going to be our moderator today. Justin Murff is the president of NexGenerosity and the chairman of Millenials for Marriage and he's also a staff member of Strategic Resource Group out of Santa Barbara, California. Let me offer a word of prayer for us as we gather and then I'll turn it directly over to Justin.

[2] If you'd bow your heads and pray with me please. Our Heavenly Father, we come before you and bow our hearts before you as the father of your whole family and, Lord, we ask that your Spirit would be brooding over us and that your Spirit would be enlivening our minds as we gather as representatives of your global body to reflect on your purposes of witnessing the gospel in the world. Lord, we ask that the technology would facilitate this conversation well, that we would think together well, that we would think Christianly, that we would think biblically, that we would operate respectfully, and be open to understand what it is that you may be calling your church to do. God, if there are words of warning for you to give to us, words of counsel, words of admonition, we ask that you would help us to be mindful and to receive those as well. God, we ask for your wisdom and we thank you that we are a part of your body and that by your Spirit, you continue to work over this world. We pray these things in your name and thanking you, God, that you deliver these things because you are good. In your name, amen.

[3] Without further ado, we welcome Justin Murff.

[4] Justin Murff: Well, thanks everybody. I appreciate it, and it's exciting to be with all of you. As Dr. Armstrong mentioned, I work with Strategic Resource Group [SRG]. I also lead our digital initiatives at SRG, so that includes digital fundraising, digital distribution of content, and digital and virtual churches. And so I'm coming to you actually from Amman, Jordan today, where I have been having just a great time meeting with some pioneering thinkers in the space of virtual and digital church movements here in the Middle East. And so that's where I wanted to kind of start the conversation and just go through just some really brief details before I introduce some of the friends who I've invited to join us to just share on why virtual church for them is a necessity.

[5] So let's take a look here at exploring out virtual church and virtual ecclesiology. In looking at creating a digital ecclesiology, one of the things we think about is forward thinking for the church. And so if we look at the basic term, right, if we go into the Greek, we see it meaning something along the line of an assembly of Christians gathered for worship and a religious meeting. Well, could that be virtual? So in looking at digital ecclesiology, one of things that we want to ask is, Can we actually go through digital ecclesiology in in terms of real church? Is it real church? Is it authentic church? Is it the body of Christ as we understand it to be from Scripture? Is it that simply where two or three are

more gathered digitally Christ is present and he's felt? These are some of the questions that we begin to look at.

[6] We also want to talk about the issue of omnipresence and human agency. We believe in the God who is everywhere, who is ever present. We also believe that his Spirit indwells us, fills us, guides us, and leads us. And so through the omnipresence of God and through the filling of the Holy Spirit, can we create an incarnation or presence for the church in digital and virtual spaces? We're already seeing that happen, but with every virtual church that get started, there's oftentimes a myriad of questions from pastors and well-intended churchgoers who say, "Well, that's not really church. That's just fake church, or it's playing church." But, could it be that those actually become truly the church? When we look at the function, the roots of the church, we can kind of pull these out. You look at the Great Commandment and you look at the Great Commission. So in the Great Commandment, we read that, "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your mind." That's worship, right. "And you shall love your neighbor as yourself." That's service and ministry. And then if we look at the Great Commission, we read that "all authority in heaven on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations." That's the call for evangelism. "Baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit." And in almost every Christian tradition Baptism is the signifier for actually bringing and receiving believers into fellowship. "Teaching them to observe all that I've commanded you." That's discipleship.

[7] So if we were to look at the five basic functions of the physical church, we'd see worship, service, evangelism, fellowship, and discipleship. And we're seeing all of these five elements actually lived out in an online environment through virtual churches. And it's not just in an evangelical context. We can actually look at organizations like one in Austria that holds and hour of prayer every day. It's very interesting. As a Catholic seminary, you see their priests carrying iPads, getting live prayer request as folks are sending then in. And during their live broadcasts, they're praying for people all over the world in real-time, incorporating us into their community and incorporating us into their prayer movement.

[8] We can essentially distill down virtual churches into three basic modes. The online church, which, the best way I could explain, would be a stream of a live service where I'm just a viewer. I'm an observer, but I'm not an active participant yet. That would go more towards virtual church, things like Life Church[1] or the Church Online,[2] where there's the opportunity for personal engagement to dialogue, to ask questions, to engage, to do the very same thing that we're doing here and zoom right now. And then we go a step further to the gaming world, into virtual reality, and we look at things like the Robloxian Church[3] that Daniel leads or Virtual Reality Church.[4] They are really pushing the envelope even

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[1] life.church
[2] https://churchonline.faith/
[3] https://www.roblox.com/games/1068523756/Church
[4] vrchurch.org

further, and some of the theologians out there at places like Durham and Regent have even asked, "Are we talking about trying to incarnate an animated object and does that animated object take on a soul?" And I think that's another discussion for another day and not something that we need to delve into, but it is certainly a question that people are asking in terms of the space of virtual reality.

[9] So when we look at online church, many of us are familiar with folks on this call. You know, of course, Jay and what they're doing is Saddleback, which has really been a tremendous model for online church. And they even have their platform, which allows folks to kind of create their own channel of content and really be ministered to based upon the tangible needs that they can select. But it also gives them the ability to invite friends and bring others along with them in the spiritual journey, which is a tremendous opportunity.

[10] I've also invited some friends that will share a little bit. One of them, the Jordanian, is going to share with us about the church online and how the church online is using a digital online platform, very similar to a virtual church environment, here in the Middle East to engage. But this is not out of convenience, but really out of necessity. We also can dive a little deeper into virtual church platforms and look at how sometimes you don't have to reinvent the wheel. Life Church, for example, has a tremendous platform that many churches, even large churches in the US, have adopted and are using. And it certainly is a model that we're encouraging churches, at least I am here in the Middle East, to look at. As we go deeper into the discussion, I wanted to invite for some comment and just a few minutes here for them to introduce themselves and explain a little about their ministry and why virtual church, for them, is not just a good idea or convenient, but really a necessity. So I want to start with the Jordanian. He's the Director of Digital Ministry for Life Agape, based here in Amman. Jordanian, can you just share with us a little bit about the impact that the online church is having and share the website so that folks can take a look at it for themselves.

[11] **The Jordanian:** Yes, hello guys. Hello everyone. I live in Jordan and just let me go directly to the church online. Because we are serving in the Arab world, we call it North African Middle East. We have 450 million people who need to know about Christ. So we have a strategy for what we are doing. We use pre-evangelistic websites and platforms. And then after that we do evangelistic websites and other strategies that form for evangelism. And then after that, for people who accept Christ, we direct them to our huge website, we call it Discipleship Online. Okay well, they take a course and they get trained, something like that. But what we found during these years that most of the Muslims, because we are targeting the Muslims who are 99 percent of the population, after they accept Christ and are on our discipleship website, want the church. They want a church. We have a challenge with this in that some countries have no churches in it, no building, you know. And so they don't have a church. And in other areas there is an existing church, but the problem is that they don't feel welcome and for security reasons they cannot go to a church. And many of the churches don't give a priority, I'm sorry to say that, to the Muslims.

[12] So God put it on my mind, I have had that burden for many years, to start what we call a church online. The ultimate goal is not the church online, but we want people to have their own church on the ground. So with the church online, we started with the Evangelical church's style for two years. It's so nice that they like it, but it did not work as a model for us to do. So we changed our strategy, and we call it "My Home, My Church." We ask a facilitator in a home, in one room in home, and he will guide six or seven people together in that room, and he will pray, give an introduction, and read the Bible. And then he will out throw some questions and a discussion will start there. So what we see is that the whole group, seven to nine of them, are growing on the same level because everyone is participating. So when we started this about two years ago and we were shocked. And beyond my faith, beyond our team's faith, we have two hundred and seventy thousand members in our churches, more than ninety-five percent of them from Muslim background. This is a huge number which is much beyond any Christian churches in in the area. So this is first.

[13] Second, we are giving them a model: this is the way how you start your own church, by calling your home "my church." And we praise God for how, in the last five or six months, we saw thirty-one churches on ground that we know of. The first one started from a Saudi brother who became Christian through our website and he was taking a course on Discipleship Online. And then he sent us an email saying that he led his wife to Christ, he led his children to Christ, and two of his neighbor's. And he told us that he is applying at his home what he learned from church online, so he's so happy that his home is his church. So this is just the summary of what we are doing. I'm dreaming of hundreds, tens of hundreds, of home churches in the Middle East and North Africa. Just let me add one bit information that we were shocked to see. We have about 12,000 Libyans who are attending our church without any promotion. We don't know how they come. And we have like 10,000 Saudis that are in our church. They tell us that they feel safe and that they consider themselves church members without having any persecution and they have the freedom to join the church. So we're so excited with what God is doing.[5]

[14] Justin Murff: Amen, thank you. I also wanted to introduce another friend. He is the Cultural Diversity Officer for the Diocese of Manchester in England. He's part of the Archbishop's College of Evangelists in the UK. And we are both Anglican, so we've been looking at the digital church aspect from a sacramental perspective. So, being formally Southern Baptist and now Anglican, a lot of these things of Baptism and Communion online were not quite as huge of hurdles as they are now in in my current role and tradition. He has been really thinking through and helping the church rethink some of these things. And so I will let him tell you the specific context that he's working in if he chooses to, but he's working in probably one of the most restrictive nations, yet a nation that is experiencing great growth for the gospel.

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[5] The Jordanian: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0IaZ2gSM2KQ&feature=youtu.be

[15] The Iranian: Good morning, or good afternoon, everyone. As was just mentioned, I'm living in United Kingdom, but I'm originally from Iran. We are involved with the underground church of Iran as well. But some of the challenges we face include, for example, Baptism. Let me give you a small illustration. We have an about 85 year old man who wanted to be baptized. And he called me and said that he was a part of our underground church, and he was begging for Baptism because he said, "I'm going to die very soon and I want to at least be baptized." And I can't go to Iran because I was arrested, I was persecuted, and after I was released, I had to flee the country. But, as you know, by Anglican sacrament, the priest for Baptism must be present. And the only solution I could find was that I sent one of my assistants to Iran and over telephone I said the prayer of a Baptism, blessed the water, and she baptized him. We have a lot of challenges to deal with regarding underground church, especially in areas with Muslim background. Our context is little bit different. For example, in Lebanon or in Jordan, Christianity is not illegal. The greater persecuting force is ordinary people, rather than government. But, in Iran, it is the other way around. The government is more radical. And because of that we try to find a solution to involve people who want to participate in church life.

[16] I believe, in my personal opinion, that there are three challenges at the moment. The first is fellowship. Because people come in the online world and do not have any kind of fellowship. Because of that, we find a solution to meet every cell of the underground church who's asked, if gathering in the home, every four months, in some safe, neighboring country like Dubai or Turkey. And the second issue we have is leadership. Because we don't want to add a number, but we have no leaders to lead in the future. Because of that, we focus on a hundred people who have potential leadership and involve them with a church digital or virtual church, and we try to give them as much as we can: the church experience, the theology, and training. And hopefully, in the future, these people become the next generation of leaders for the country of Iran when God opens the doors and the country is free. At least we have the right people and the right foundation in this.

[17] The challenge we have now is Baptism, weddings, and Holy Communion. Because I have a church member in Iran, who has been a member of my church for 10 years, but he hasn't received any Holy Communion. How we can help them to join in God's Supper, weddings, Baptisms, and even funerals? And we have to find a solution because it's not possible to go in Iran. But every young man or woman has access to Internet, to mobile, to chat rooms, to videos. Because of that, I think we have to find a solution for the future of leadership in the Middle East, especially in restricted countries. And also we can experiment. Maybe we can find a solution for the West as well, for those who can't attend the churches.

[18] Justin Murff: Thank you. So in looking at those, I wanted to bring these two examples to light for the group for two reasons. One is to be encouraged that the Lord is doing amazing things in the Middle East and that there are ministries that are having tremendous success through virtual and online church models. And, in many ways, those successes, even in those really and dark difficult countries, can give us hope in the West for reaching our

own countries and our own communities with the gospel of Christ and encouraging greater participation in the church. But on the other hand, there's also some serious questions as we look to digital missiology and digital formation of believers in the future. Many younger leaders are asking these questions. How do I actually start a church online? Should I start a church online? How can we do it well?

[19] And of course, if you notice, with both examples there's an off-ramp to a local church when possible. And in some areas or some countries or even in parts of the US, where there may not be a Bible-believing church within driving distance, digital ministry becomes the only lifeline. But there are opportunities to begin to channel people outside. So when we look at the virtual church, really, it is not just the back door or the back porch or the back window to the church, but it can become the front door or the side door or the back door or the basement door or the window: all the different avenues to get into the church. And so, that's the starting point for us. We sit around three questions to consider, and they are certainly open for discussion, but I wanted to just kick off our conversation with those two examples.

[20] So let's just start with the first question. Can church truly be virtual? There's so much that goes into the church and the life of the church. I have worked for large churches in the US, and at one in particular, First Baptist Dallas, I served as Minister of Stewardship and Generosity. There, we were undergoing a new 55 million dollar building campaign. I could tell you it didn't cost anywhere near that to build any of these online churches. And so, for me as a stewardship oriented person, I look at the tremendous benefit of doing online church in terms of just a stewardship perspective. But can the church really exist in a virtual space?

[21] **Douglas Estes:** I can go first. I think because you're asking a question of possibility, then the answer is yes, unequivocally yes. I also think that when we talk about this we want to be careful of using the word door to other churches or other modes because I think that delegitimizes what we're all trying to do or be a part of in this conversation. It seems like to me, in the example I used in my book, *SimChurch* (Zondervan, 2009), there are at least 96 different metaphors for the church in the Bible. There's not a definition for church, really, but metaphors abound. And of those 96 metaphors, not one preclude or even suggest that you can't have a virtual church, at least in an optimum sense of the word. Now, again, when we talk about what a virtual church is, and as you mentioned there's different iterations, there's going to be stronger iterations and there's going be weaker iterations. But as just a general statement, a general possibility statement, yes absolutely. It is a church.

[22] **David Han:** And if I may, I'll just follow up that comment by saying that perhaps if the question is phrased another way, then it asks a different kind of question. Should the church be virtual? Then you're not talking about the both-and, but rather either-or type of approach. So, if contextual particularity demands no other option but a virtual church, that is a different kind of question than asking whether virtual church can replace the bodily presence of community of saints. The question was phrased in a way that I think I agree

with the previous answer given. Can a church truly be virtual? If the contextual particularities limit how you can actually have a church, then why would why would we not encourage that. But if the question is phrased slightly differently, then it asks a different kind of question. And then it raises different kinds of questions, like sacramental practice is a concern that's been raised, and I can think of a few other concerns as well.

[23] **Justin Murff:** Then, David, let's go with that question. Should the church be virtual?

[24] **Andrew Sears:** I looked at this question and kind of did my doctoral research on a similar question—disruptive innovation in Christian higher education. And I've had this conversation hundreds, maybe thousands, of times with people around Christian higher education. So it's a similar type of question. And I think that a better way of framing it is by asking in what context is it helpful and how do you make it as healthy as possible? I think that's a better way because that that avoids the either/or. And let me just fill in a few of the lessons that we've learned in Christian higher education in answering those things.

[25] So probably the most helpful concept around this, and there's a lot that the field of disruptive innovation brings to this conversation, but the concept of bundling and unbundling is what happens whenever you have a new technology. The first new automobiles were called horseless carriages, and you just tried to make it work like the old way, but faster. But then you find ways to completely reorganize. And I recently moved to North County San Diego, and I attend North Coast Church, which was one of the first pioneers in multi-campus and in multi-site. And all the sermons are done by live video stream in almost all the campuses. So it's a thirteen thousand member church with maybe a couple thousand seeing it live. So probably eighty or ninety percent of the people don't see it live. And what that church has done is it's said, "Okay here's the components of a healthy church. You need to need to have a message, you need to have worship, and you need to have fellowship." But they rebundled them in a way that actually is really helpful. So the sermon happens and it's not live for ninety percent of the church, but currently in our church ninety-two percent of the church attends small groups. So they put all that effort into attending small groups, so fellowship is really strong. Something that's a little surprising to me coming into this is that they decided to do worship live, and I think that that makes sense. And the reality is that it's a very healthy church.

[26] I can also talk about my University. So I run a Christian University. We recently moved from having an office to not having an office. And on one hand, there's a lot that's lost because we're not relating to each other in person. But, on the other hand, all of us are getting a lot more invested into our local communities. And I'm able to choose where to live based on the needs of my family, not based on a bunch of other factors. So I think part of it is you have to look at what it means to have a healthy life as a Christian, what it means to have a healthy congregation, and then how you can reassemble those out of the components that are available. And you're going to have a lot of different contexts. It's really interesting to me hearing the context in the Middle East and in various countries where it really only makes sense to do it the way they're doing it. And I think that one size

fits all question probably isn't the best approach. Now the last thing I would say, and John Dyer is kind of one of the experts on this, is that technology has a built-in bias. I think as more and more people start to do online church, it's going to steer us towards the more disconnection. So question is, How do you resist that built-in bias? And I think that's how we have to be intelligent in this. So hopefully that's helpful.

[27] David Han: Justin, if I may answer and follow-up to what Andrew said, because reformulation of the question is something that I raised, so I would like to give my answer to the question if we were to rephrase it to, Should the church to truly be virtual? My answer to that is going to be provisional, "yes," to the extent that it's one other alternative way of having a church community. But I want to use the analogy that Andrew used, about how he compared this to how we do education. So at our seminary, we do a lot of online courses. What we're trying to do with online learning is that we want to make sure that there is a formation component. And it takes a lot more work to have the foundational component in online learning. But we strive to do that.

[28] So after having done this over a decade now, the answer that I seem to find regarding whether we should pursue further into online learning or not, and there are seminaries that are doing fully online programs, but the answer that I found would be helpful is a diversification. It's not just a question of either/or. We don't just abandon the former model and jump onto the new model of doing everything virtual. I think diversification, if education is used analogously, gives us an insight to this question. I would think that we need to look at the merits of both having this virtual church where context has demanded it and, on the other hand, there are these merits of bodies coming together in a physical space and doing sacramental practices together and all this. So I don't think it's a question of either/or. I think the answer is in diversifying ways in which the Christian community comes together in worship.

[29] Jay Kranda: First off, I'm glad to be gathering such a large Zoom call. This is really cool that we're talking about this on a group call like this. I was going to add that I feel like there's a version of this down the line that's really hard for us to even understand because we're talking about a future that's gonna be very different. My pastor tells a story about how fifteen years ago he had people leave his church because they bought two computers. And the people said they would never use two computers. And now we all have computers. And it's because this reality, whatever it's gonna be, I don't know if it's going to be if in-person is going to be more real or what that really looks like, but there's definitely a version of this that I don't think we really understand. So it's kind of like an atheist saying that there's proof there's no God when intellectually they're being dishonest because you can't scientifically prove there's no God from his point of view. They're showing their opinion. And I also think, I want to echo this for sure, there's something about the in-person that is premium if there's an option.

[30] So we don't want to push something to this this reality. Just because we know what's possible, doesn't mean we compromise what is really potentially more powerful. I think of

this often as the thief on the cross. The thief on the cross somehow crossed this barrier of eternity without God to eternity with God and hit the bare minimum of what it means to have a relationship with Jesus. But we never strive to just be the thief on the cross, we want to have a life like Paul and so forth. If we're preaching a gospel that is just about the bare minimum, then we've kind of missed the point. There's this full expression. And with this online church conversation, we need to be better at discerning the fuller expression.

[31] So obviously that's really simple in the United States. Usually there's a church down the street. That doesn't mean there's always a church that aligns with you theologically and all sorts of things. Our ministry plugs in thousands of people every year into churches, and I have to do a lot of due diligence just to make sure that they're not a cult or something else. It gets really hard. And then you move internationally and there's even more trouble because maybe they don't have a website. And so there's a lot of coordination that has to happen. But we also have to realize that there are real security concerns on the ground, like we've heard on this call. There are sickness concerns. A lot of smaller churches can't support people that are terminally sick or elderly. And because they can't, they don't know how to do it. And so they start coming to our ministry because the church of one-hundred people can't really resource it. And then there are different seasons of life, and people traveling, and those are real realities. But I think it's really hard just to think about this in a future tense because I do think there's a form of this that is undefined. We're seeing versions of it, but I see it as a gradual conversation. It is the same thing like Zoom. My first version of video calls were Skype years and years ago. And now Zoom has made this a lot easier and can say, "Oh, video calls are a lot easier," because I've had this slow adoption and the technology is getting better. And I think online ministry is going to have that over the next five to ten years.

[32] **Justin Murff:** So, Dr. Armstrong asked this really good differential question. So by looking at "virtual," are we talking 2-D, like we're doing now? And that's really how I would perceive it. But what about in the virtual reality space? And is there an ethical problem with being an avatar that's not a genuine reflection of yourself in that aspect of church? Or is that just another iteration where in some contexts that can provide extra security and in other contexts it is weakening or cheapening the connection and the ability to develop meaningful relationships because of the anonymity?

[33] **Ali Khalil:** Can I share a couple of things my name is Ali, and I'm the project manager at the Global Proclamation Commission. Actually, in preparation for this meeting, I did read some kind of an article about virtual reality, in which people are actually represented by an avatar, the pastor is an avatar, and everybody that joins in are actually avatars. And, based on the article, this gives some kind of inclusiveness. People feel that they are welcome, especially because you can actually meet and greet people and connect with them even in that virtual cocoon just from, I don't know, your bedroom maybe. But yes, I think one of the major issues that would evolve from that is this fluid identity. One wouldn't know who's who and you just are somehow hiding behind some kind of an avatar. But I could just give an illustration that is just a parallel, which are the dating apps that exist today. And so

people would go there and create a profile. Regardless of if that profile is real or not, it may maintain some kind of reality. And then they try to interact, they see if they like or they don't like people, and then you have this first interaction and you learn and you get to know them, and then you maybe decide to meet that person or not. So I don't know if a virtual church could create this type of environment where I would feel safe. Maybe I receive that part when people start connecting with virtual people when I don't know who these people are and, bit by bit, maybe at some point manage to connect or meet with them. I know this might be part of the last question, but I hope this this input was helpful.

[34] **Justin Murff:** I was just going to point out that on the call we have three pioneering thought leaders who are really pushing this space in virtual reality. Pastor DJ Soto of Virtual Reality Church, Daniel Herron of the Robloxian Christians, and Quinn Taber with Immerse, who's working on virtual reality. And so we have three of the sharpest tools in the shed when it comes to this on the call, so I'm gonna defer anything from that space to those guys.

[35] **DJ Soto:** I'll just chime in this for just a quick second. My name is DJ, and I'm the lead pastor of Virtual Reality Church, a church that exists entirely in VR. And I think for me going back to what Dr. Armstrong said, terminology is important. And so I use digital and virtual reality. We were at a conference and my wife was confused as we talking about digital and virtual reality. So when I express digital, I think things like online streaming, online campuses. All those things for me personally, when I do presentations, are digital. And then virtual reality, I think, separates in term a little bit. But that's just how we do it.

[36] And then just to go back to what we were saying about the immersive nature of what it would be like to have a church in VR. For us, it's been an amazing journey. My wife and I were part of a mega church, and we left that to go plant what we thought would be physical churches. And now we realize God wants us to plant churches in virtual reality. So that's what we've been doing for the last two years. And we would not have imagined in a million years that we would plant VR churches. When we first started, this was this more of an experiment. And then when we realized the immersive nature of VR, the sense of community, discipleship, and all these elements, we were just blown away by it. And we've come to the conclusion very quickly that, yes, you can have *ecclesia* inside a virtual reality environment. There can be discipleship, we do the sacraments, and all the elements that you would see in the physical church for the life of the church, we experience in virtual reality.

[37] **Daniel Herron:** My name is Daniel. I'm the pastor and founder of the Robloxian Christians Online Church [RCC], and I think it's interesting that we've been talking about whether online and virtual churches should exist or take a role in this ministry. And then we were also talking about avatars and how we're represented online is really important. So, from my experience leading online church, and we use the term online rather than virtual church because we are on an online gaming platform. So we're on a different video game

platform that's used by youth and young people. So everything that we do is inside of a larger company, a larger platform.

[38] When we were talking about if online churches should or can exist, I always refer back to Matthew 18:20, when it says, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am with them." Because I think that when we talk about avatars, and this it's really important to remember, that it doesn't matter necessarily what we look like when we go in-person, or when we're online. It doesn't matter what the representation is as long as it's the intention and the integrity of the people that are there. So if you're there representing yourself virtually, and, for example, on Roblox, on the platform that our church is on, people will show up with their little square avatars, their little blocky guys, and they can wear whatever they want to by creating their own avatar designs on Roblox. So people will come wearing all sorts of things and it kind of represents their personality a little bit. And also I think that the dynamic of being a being an online avatar, so being separate from your own self, really allows for you to not necessarily be who you are in reality, but also not be fake. Instead, it allows you to just be more comfortable with who you are. I think that's really important.[6]

[39] **Justin Murff:** Daniel, how many people are on RCC?

[40] **Daniel Herron:** I believe we just passed twenty thousand. I think we're at twenty-eight point five thousand right now.

[41] **Jay Kranda:** And what's the average age of that group? I think the more compelling part of this is how young your group is.

[42] **Daniel Herron:** Yeah, our average age is fourteen. I think our range is from seven to maybe early- or mid-college age. So we really have a range, but the middle is middle school and high school.

[43] **Jay Kranda:** So we're all Facebook and you're like Snapchat, just to be clear.

[44] **Justin Murff:** I want to jump to the second question. How do we reconcile sacramental theology and digital ecclesiology? And maybe don't even limit ir to sacramental theology

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[6] Otto Kladensky: How many traditional churchgoers are "real," and how many are just performing?
Douglas Estes: The question you ask Otto seems to be true regardless of iteration (rural, mega, online). It just looks different in different ways.
Nicholas Smith: How can Church leaders conduct pastoral counseling and soul care with an Avatar?
Daniel Herron: For our church, we've done some polling on this. About 2/3 of our congregation attend a church in addition to TRC, and 1/3 rely on the online church as their only church.
Bryan Litfin: To Daniel's point about avatars being a "safer" way for people to be in a church (Let's set aside the persecution setting for a moment), is it legitimate for a Western, non-persecuted person to hide themselves from the community or remain anonymous?

specifically, but there are some real questions. How do we do the Lord's Supper? How do we do Baptism? How do we even perform marriages in some instances? These are some real wrestling issues that we're going to have to deal with if we look at, as DJ says, the digital church, which I love that distinction between digital and virtual. I love that distinction. Thank you, DJ. So, any thoughts, any ideas on that?[7]

[45] Michael Svigel: Say Justin, if I can chime in here just for a moment. Thus far, if I'm hearing everybody correctly, the perspective has been expressed that online and virtual church can and should, I suppose, be done. I don't think we've heard any voices from the other perspective, challenging whether it actually can be and ought to be done, which I suppose would roll into some of the other questions. Especially given that usually criticisms of online or virtual church relate directly to whether a right exercise of the sacraments is even possible. So I think reason I was invited to this is that I obviously have taken a different perspective on that, but I would love to hear from a few voices in connection with the first and the second question from the negative point, though I hate to express it that way.

[46] Tim Williams: I might jump in, if I may. Hey everybody, I'm Tim. I'm super honored to be here. I'm from a church called Eagle Brook and I'm the online church pastor there. I'm the online pastor, but I'm going to add to what you're saying because I think it kind of goes back to what everybody is saying. I think that original question is maybe the wrong question to ask. Because when you think about what church is, you know, church is people. So you might ask, Could a person truly be digital? And I think the answer is probably "no" to that, not fully. It kind of even goes back to this conversation ten years ago in retail, like Amazon versus Walmart and that sort of thing. What we found is that we live in both worlds, so wherever people are there the church will somehow be.

[47] But it can't fully and only live there because the church doesn't exist for itself, right. We don't gather for ourselves. We get together to be encouraged and then to go out to the world. We exist for the world, so wherever the world is, there we must be doing the work of God, which is to love people, to serve people, serve widows and orphans, not be polluted by the world. Isaiah 58 is a great model if like, "Hey you guys are getting together and feeling really good about yourselves, but you're totally missing the point of what you're supposed to do." So can the organizational church exist virtually as what we understand in the Western world, which is my context? You know, as an organization can it? Well, probably. You know in some way, can we facilitate some gathering, can we figure out ways for people to partake of Communion virtually, as far as like on a Zoom call or something? I'm sure we can. Does the Holy Spirit transcend time and space in that way? Absolutely. I think we'd probably all agree in some level on that.

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[7] Bryan Litfin: DJ Soto recently told me about an online baptism that his church had, in which the physical recipient of baptism never touched water. It was all in the digital or virtual world. Does it matter if you never touch literal water, or never ingest actual bread and wine in a human mouth?

[48] But I would agree that I think it's just another vessel, right. It's like writing a book or using words. VR is a vessel, Zoom calls are a vessel, online is a vessel of the nature of people. And so I think it's a wonderful opportunity digitally because we actually get clearer access to people's true nature, which I think God is most interested in. You know, by the nature of a tree you'll produce fruit. And so in these unfiltered spaces, we can actually help form people more truly, even though I think we're doing a pretty poor job at that. But I would say, just in answer to your question, can people truly be digital? No. We are called to love our neighbors, like the people in your physical sphere, but also your neighbors online. You're called to do it all. I don't think it's limited.

[49] As digital churches do actually exist, whether we like it or not, I hope that this conversation will actually help the western church clarify an effective church is and why the church exists. Because the church isn't dying; it's just changing, right. And part of that is that we're learning and growing in awareness of what is an effective church and how to create disciples, because it's not about just believing a right set of dogmatic theology. It's about actually going and doing things in our worlds, wherever our worlds are physically and digitally and whatever else may come. Wherever people are, we need to be bringing the kingdom in that way. So I would kind of say, "yes and no." It's not a full "no." So, Michel, so sorry I didn't chime in on that, but I think it's a "no" if it's limited to that and you're saying, "Yeah, I can be a full-on disciple of Jesus without going over to my neighbor's house and saying, 'Hey I'd love to just help you or just want you to know I'm here,'" and actually being caring for widows and orphans and the things that God says, that Jesus says you need to do.[8]

[50] Jonathan Armstrong: Now we're really getting somewhere. So, Justin you launched us in on the question of, "Can the church exist in a virtual environment?" and we were about to transition to tactical questions. I think we've made a right change that we actually need to bore down on the definition of the church before we can proceed to the tactical questions. The church is a mystery; the church is the new creation of God. It's probably not something that will fully come about by my Oculus Go headset, even though that might be a useful tool. We have on the call Father Tim Clancy. Father Tim Clancy, may I ask you to respond to this from a Roman Catholic perspective. How would you ask that question that we've been stumbling through? Can the church exist in virtual reality? And Darrell Bock, may I ask you also to respond to this? Darrell Bock is on the board at Wheaton College and has written a whole lot of books on many different topics. I'd like Dr. Darrell Bock from Dallas Theological Seminary also to weigh in on that question please.[9]

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[8] The Second Jordanian: I wonder if the virtual church experience is going to be much different from the megachurch experience since the megachurch movement has already adopted a "come and receive" model of church. If the concern for the virtual church is that it is not going to have space to serve and give back, I think the same objection applies to many megachurches in the US and around the world.

[9] John Dyer: Can the church truly be virtual? Posed this way, if you say, "No," it seems like you're saying these ministries aren't valid, real, or legitimate. If you say, "Yes," it seems like you're conceding that embodiment doesn't matter. I want fully embrace and validate the wonderful uses of technology to reach the lost and disciple

[51] Tim Clancy: I'm a Jesuit philosopher of religion and philosopher of technology. And I'm researching the intersection of that, specifically with virtual technologies such as virtual church. I agree with what somebody said early on in that I don't think the question can be whether, the questions got to be how. I don't think the Church can miss this. I also think that often the question isn't whether online churches will substitute, but how they can supplement offline churches. I think the vast majority of people who participate online also participate offline, at least that's what a lot of studies have shown. So the idea is that we live in multiple worlds, that I shop at Walmart but I also shop at Amazon. So thinking of this in hybrid terms, I think, is the most useful way. I'm fascinated by the underground church people, for whom offline isn't an option. Does that mean that online churches are inherently second best because it's restricted to just the online medium rather than face-to-face and literate mediums? That's an interesting question. I'm also agreeing with Jay that it's going to be a couple hundred years before we really figure out what is going on. And that right now we are kind of in the horseless carriage stage of this. And we don't even know what an online church that really exploits the medium and is its own thing and not simply a horseless carriage is. I'm not sure we're yet in the position to even speculate as to what that would be. I mean we can start, and we have to start, otherwise we'll never get there. But I think it's just very early days, and I think it's a time for just wide-open experimentation.

[52] Tim Williams: Discovery.

[53] Tim Clancy: Yeah, discovery.

[54] Darrell Bock: I'll chime in. Several things here. I think the contextual issue is immense. It makes all the difference in the world whether someone has access to a church as we traditionally think about it or not. And if they don't, then what do you do. And I think that, really, online is a huge gift that has been created to enable us to be able to go somewhere with that. So that's the first observation I would make. The second observation I would make is that every medium has its strengths and its weaknesses. And we need to wrestle with what is what virtual contexts can do well and what they do poorly or not as well. And we need to try to figure out what those things are and how they work. And I think some of Andrew's comments earlier pushed in that direction. I think online churches are great at giving people what they need to get instruction and to have some sense of fellowship or connection with people, particularly if they're in a very isolated context and those kinds of things.

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believers, while also acknowledging the real loss when embodiment isn't possible due to sickness, security, or other reasons.
Darrell Bock: It is a legitimate hybrid kind of presence? This recognizes both its strengths and limitations.

[55] But, then, the church, and this was Tim's point, isn't just about receiving, it's about giving in some way. It's about connecting interpersonally in some way. And the question is how to get that dimension in, other than perhaps encouraging people to move out into their own communities, which would be very easy to do. I think that's a challenge, or even engaging in something that could be considered a joint effort of some kind. Those are bigger hurdles, it would seem to me. So, I guess I think we were right to change the question at the start because I think digital churches and communities exist. You aren't going to define them out of existence. You're going to want to think through what the most effective way to have them is. They are catalysts. They are foundations. They are places to catch people who otherwise might not be able to connect and or have been culturally shut off from being able to form their churches in the way we might traditionally think about them.

[56] They obviously are a catch point for young people who are exploring. I think the numbers that we heard earlier coming from that seven to fourteen range. Usually in a church, you know, that's something that's happening in the back. That's not something that's happening in the front of the church. That's a catalyzing and curiosity filling slot to some degree. But once we've catalyzed and laid some of the foundation and encouraged people, I think the next question is, But then what do you do with them? And where do they go? And how do you move them into not just receiving, but taking what they've received in the way they've been formed and asking them to turn around and give and contribute? I think that may be a challenge for digital churches to think about beyond the personal formation, which certainly can be can be enhanced in this in this context, but thinking about more corporate connected efforts.

[57] **Tim Clancy:** And also just to follow on that, Billy Graham's ministry might be a broadcast analog. I mean, I think he doesn't see his ministry as on its own, but as a hybrid with local churches. And that might be kind of the way we go.

[58] **Dan Churchwell:** Jonathan, I'd like to jump in. I've been studying this for the last fifteen years the, last three at a think-tank primarily focused on technology and the future of work in general. I think there are very clear, thorny theological issues that I think are fair to work through: sacraments, etcetera. But I think more fundamentally or philosophically that there's a whole discipline that studies this called media ecology. And for almost fifty years, the media ecologists have been engaging this topic heavily. So Marshall McLuhan, Jacques Ellul, and there's dozens. This gets at fundamentally what it means to be human. When you talk about the hyper individuality of the online platforms, Marshall McLuhan was famous for saying, "The medium is the message." And so this fundamentally changes the medium from in-person, contextual, the touch point of human to human. So it changes definitions of community. There's so much wrapped up here that I think we would be remiss to not

mention on a call like this that there's a whole discipline called media ecology with people who have spent decades trying to work through some of these philosophical issues.[10]

[59] These issues are not separate from, but would coincide with the theological issues we're discussing. And so Jaron Lanier, Tristan Harris, Amy Webb are current thinkers in just the raw tech space right now. I just think we need to be thoughtful when we bring these topics up that there is a whole body of literature that we shouldn't be hyper-spiritualizing some of our comments and avoiding some of the very clear distinctions. For example, Neil Postman has six clear questions to ask any new technology. And I and I think it would be interesting to have here in the virtual church conversation a discussion of his six classic questions for any new technology. So that's just my piece.[11]

[60] **DJ Soto:** Those are all great comments, and I love the perspective that people were bringing. I think that I'll probably differ a little bit as far as the digital stuff and the church that we experience in virtual reality. But then I think there's a whole different level of conversation, and that's generational. So all of us, probably, have had technology introduced to us. But my kid is it's fully integrated. Probably the only one in here who has been integrated is Daniel Herron. Daniel, you probably are the youngest among us. So as we generationally struggle at this level, the generation coming up behind us is having a completely different conversation. So my kids aren't on social media or Facebook or Instagram, not because I say they can't, but because it doesn't even interest them. It's not even on their radar. This is a different world, where there's platforms called Discord and Twitch, the Fortnite platform. And so, for them, I think digital church is not even going to be a theological struggle. We're having that tension now and that struggle is throughout all our conversations, but I think for the generation that's coming up it's not even going to be an issue. But, Justin, do you want to talk about the sacraments? Are we waiting on that? Or do you want to chat about that one?

[61] **Justin Murff:** With respect for time, it would be good to at least jump towards that topic and take a look. It's one thing to do Baptism by Zoom or Skype, but it's quite another thing what you've done, which is Baptism in virtual reality. It's created a lot of conversation, and so maybe it's a good segue. Could you just touch on how you've dealt with that issue in VR? And then we can go from there.

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[10] Joe Svancara: It seems to me that much of the discussion is about how existing religious communities extend or project themselves into digital spaces and how they negotiate the structural issues connected to that (e.g. authority). I'd be interested in comments on online spaces as places of spiritual encounter and what a perspective of the work of the Spirit in shaping new Christian communities might be like in these spaces. Do we go online and expect to meet God?

[11] Neil postman's 6 questions: Here are six questions Postman says we must ask when someone tells us about a new technology – What is the problem to which this technology is a solution? Whose problem is it? What new problems might be created by solving the original problem? Which people and what institutions will be most seriously harmed by this new technology? What changes in language are being forced by these new technologies? What sort of people and institutions gain special economic and political power from this new technology?

[62] DJ Soto: I'll just do a quick hit on that one. Feel free to email me about more in-depth subjects. We've had a couple of Baptisms in virtual reality where we've been in an environment where there's a pool and we brought people in and we immersed them in the name of the Father, and Son, and the Holy Spirit. There's a lot of controversy about that. A couple of news articles wrote about that. And, for us, our elder teams took some time to think about it. It wasn't a quick decision. We got our elders and our church leaders involved. And everyone quickly came to the conclusion that it made sense. And I think the challenge for us is that, for those that have never experienced VR and have been in that immersive world, there is a major disconnect. And so once people have tried VR and tried that immersive nature and have actually even attended our services or our Baptisms, there is just about a 180-degree change in response.

[63] I'm not giving it justice, but the short story is that we believe the sacraments to be symbolic, so we don't ascribe to the literalist washing your sins or the elements becoming the body of Christ. So, in the spirit of that symbolism, we want to express the sacrament in a virtual reality environment. Particularly for those like one gal that got baptized who has a condition that make it so she can't leave her home. Not having gone to church in years, she's able to be part of the life of the church. And I remember when she was coming up out of the water, she was bawling and crying and said something to the effect of she never thought she'd be able to do this. She never thought she'd be able to get baptized and be a part of the life in the church. This goes back to the idea that it's hard to understand until you've actually been there and experienced that. But that's kind of a nutshell of our VR sacraments. And we've done a Communion just recently. So that's just the nuts and bolts for you.

[64] Daniel Herron: I think that a lot of the questions that have been in the chat have been related to the separation between online virtual churches and physical in-person churches, brick-and-mortar churches. I think that one of the key differences there, from the online perspective, the Roblox perspective, I think that there is immense value in physical communities, physical brick-and-mortar churches. I think there are things that can happen there that are limited online. For us, we represent Communion. So we have the cup and the bread and we talk about it during most services and events, but we don't we can't necessarily interact with it. And I don't believe that giving it to your virtual avatar is the same as necessarily eating and drinking of the bread and the wine. With that said, I think that there is something that Jay Kranda is doing that is really interesting at Saddleback, and that is the facilitation of Communion and encouraging people to go to a store and buy the bread and the wine, and then take it as a group during their service independently. I think that's really interesting.

[65] Also, I'll respond really quickly to another thing in the chat. There's something about the avatar thing, asking if it is it a luxury or irresponsible to represent ourselves. I think that there is something that comes out in this and it's the authenticity and the vulnerability. When people are being vulnerable in these spaces and they're actually sharing real information. I think that it is easy to hide authenticity in a physical church. A lot of the

young people that we talk to are afraid or uncomfortable sharing some of their life situations with their youth pastor with their pastor in their church, but they're more comfortable doing it in an online body because they don't have to necessarily worry about what they look like or if they're being judged or any of those sorts of things. And I think that's one of the really important things about the online virtual world.[12] In terms of sacraments, I think with that vulnerability there are there are benefits. I don't know if we have the physical capacity at, least on Roblox, for us to be able to administer it, but I seek to do what Jay is doing in terms of encouraging people to take it with themselves on their own while we had facilitated service. I think that's a really interesting idea.

[66] Jay Kranda: I'll just continue. Thanks Daniel. I think context is really important, where people are coming from. I've talked to DJ before about this, and there's some things he's doing that we wouldn't do as a church. But I also think it's very important to understand that DJ is an evangelist and he's reaching people in a very unique context. And that changes the terms. Often, when I've talked to pastors in the Middle East about what people are doing underground online, honestly it's hard for me to even conceptually understand their scenario to say, "Oh, you should do church like this." And they can't do church like I do church here in Southern California. It's just completely different, and so it changes the conversation. DJ is reaching atheists on a whole other level. Still in America, you could put up a church and people might come to your church because they might have grown up Christian homes, but in other parts of the world that's not happening. And it's definitely not happening on VR, on Altspace. People aren't casually walking into his church, so it's just a totally different conversation.[13]

[67] Now for us, we definitely have some reservations because we're unsure what's gonna happen. And I'm not willing to say what can or can't happen because I still think there's some stuff we're gonna figure out. But with us, we very much see it as a way to decentralize church in a very powerful way. And when we talk about that, we mean that we can centralize content very easily online right now. And a lot of the online universities are learning that. Honestly a lot of the early research was in the university space with what's possible. But for us, we see that we can push this content online, but we're gonna encourage people to gather to have *ecclesia* in their own home. And we have different denominations here, but because we're Southern Baptists, I joked that the Southern Baptist strategy is like a zombie strategy - anybody can become a pastor. Because of that, we really lean into that priesthood of all believers, where anybody can baptize each other and anybody can facilitate Communion with some training. Now, I know denominationally that's going to be a little different, depending the level of who you want to facilitate that.

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[12] Bryan Litfin: I would like to ask a definitional question. When we say virtual, do we mean a 2D like we are doing now, where we stay in our real world setting? Is that different from an immersive setting inside the goggles in which we are represented by an avatar and perhaps are anonymous? Those seem like two very different theological questions.
Ali K: I think virtual 3D reality exists already. And I think that's what Justin meant. This is a regular online video call and chat.

[13] in our area 49% are under the age of 17.

[68] I had a story in Northern Ireland where I had somebody who was in a domestic abuse situation who couldn't attend a church because of her partner. I found she came to faith online through an online group. And I found somebody three cities over that was willing to baptize her. This took coordination, but we paid for the rental of this pool, and they baptized her. The person who worked at this facility recorded it and these two women got to experience this Baptism, and I'm thousands and thousands of miles away and this woman who got baptized isn't able to go to a church because of some restrictions right now. And this is in a safe country. But we were able to facilitate physical connection and a physical baptism.

[69] And I think a lot of these things you can decentralize. And it's important to remember again that what is giving a little bit of confusion to this conversation is that we have these buildings, specifically in America, that we really unfortunately get caught up on. And we call church this thing that we go to. For the first three-hundred years, the church didn't have buildings as we understand it and it was growing. This is why I'm glad we have legitimate theologians talking about this, what is the actual church. And I think a lot of times, at least in the American church, what leads to this confusion is that most people call online church just their Facebook stream, and we know church is much more than just streaming things. It's the community. And so right now with online groups, we're still primarily funneling them ultimately to home gatherings, home *ecclesia*, where Communion can happen and where Baptism can happen.

[70] Michael Svigel: Well, I want to just mention here that I'm really enthralled with this and I'm really interested in viewing the sacraments as hurdles that a presupposed, legitimate, full-bodied, online church needs to sort of deal with or come to terms with. For me, however, they're more than hurdles. They seem like roadblocks. They are the thing that forces me to the position I have. I see an online presence and online ministry and the majority of everything that has been described by advocates as positive things and as extensions of the church. But when it comes to the sacraments, I find myself really stuck there.[14]

[71] And, Jay, you've touched on how a part of it is how we are defining the church and how we are defining the sacraments.[15] I know this is going to sound strange coming from an independent Bible church tradition, but I have a very high view of the sacraments and the embodied nature of those things, mostly because I'm a patristic scholar and I'm trying to reflect the biblical and the early Christian understanding of Baptism as being an initiation into a body. It is not something you can administer to yourself by definition, any more than

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[14] Tim Clancy: I would agree with Michael in that I would hate to see virtual rituals substitute for sacramental rituals. I would rather create new rituals that can complement. Perhaps social media may serve as an analogue. Social media usually enhances relationships that are also face to face. On the other hand, I am intrigued with experimenting with a small group in a house church share the eucharist as part of a wider, online service.

[15] Douglas Estes: The definition I worked out for church in *SimChurch* is "a localized assembly of the people of God dwelling in meaningful community with the task of building the Kingdom."

you could give birth to yourself. And then the Lord's Supper itself being a communion of fellowship with Christ, but also with one another. And in both of these images, biblically and historically, we're seeing the body image being described in the obviously anti-docetic and anti-gnostic context of early Christianity. The presence of the body gathered as well as the body of Christ in Communion had importance. And so I'm going to be in a very awkward position of as an independent Bible church. I'm finding myself arguing where I hope I'm going to see more of my higher sacramental traditions coming at this from my angle. But it does seem also I'm finding myself in the awkward position of being on a different side of an issue than even my Anglican brothers and sisters in the in the chat. So it's kind of strange. I'd love to hear from people who would have that same kind of hang-up as me.[16]

[72] The Second Jordanian: I'm from Jordan and I'm kind of experimenting with this whole idea of digital communities. I'm trying to refrain from really using the term "church" because of issues relating to theological questions and possible conflict with local leaders and so on. But Michael, I have a question for you that I've been really thinking about. I would agree with you that there needs to be a certain kind of physicality to the sharing of the sacraments. Now do they need to be administered from one person to another where they are in geographical proximity to one another like that? Is that a necessity? So the example that I am thinking about is what if somebody can dunk themselves in a tub of water while another person really oversees the whole operation and we can call that Baptism. Or do the two people have to be in the same location? Of course, there is a total dimension of understanding the sacraments to be symbolic, rather than having, for lack of a better word, an ontological existence, where there is a there is something that is actually happening as you're administering sacraments. So if you would take a symbolic understanding of the sacraments, I think that there shouldn't be a big problem in this. But if you take more of a physical, ontological dimension to the sacraments, I think that's where a lot of the theological questions actually pop up in a very real way.

[73] Michael Svigel: Right. I don't want to dominate the conversation, but you're hitting the nail in the head there. It is how you define the sacraments and understand if they are merely symbols. So pretty much everybody on these screens is going to say it is symbolic. The question is, Is it merely symbolic? And I would side with those who would say it is not a mere symbol, that it is also mediating something. And I would take a more incarnational view of the sacraments, which we cannot overemphasize to the exclusion of the physical, the spiritual, or the symbolic meaning. And so to your question, I would answer "no." It can't be self-administered, it never has been. This is not a biblical-historical approach.

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[16] Joe Svancara: I feel like when things change, the more they stay the same. When we face questions about the Church going digital and the implications of that, it makes us confront how we have treated the Church and trying to understand what it NEEDS to be to remain a church.
Jay Kranda: That's an interesting way of thinking about it. I like it.
The Jordanian: I love the Saddleback VR , but for the Muslim believers we want them to learn that they are the Church, they don't watch Church.

[74] And the same with the Lord's Supper. It cannot be administered at home to yourself. Just as there's one bread, there's one body. And we are partaking as one body. I'm having trouble overcoming these passages of Scripture, as well as the weight of the Great Tradition. Again, this is a theological method presupposition, but I feel the biblical-historical practice is that which has precedence. And the burden of proof is on someone who is going to redefine the sacraments in a way that allows for something that is disembodied in a corporate sense. So this is where I'm coming from. I think it's going to be, for me, more of a roadblock. This is not to completely dismiss the entire ministry online, which I really do think has a very valid role to play, but I think I'm going to have a hard time overcoming the sacramental side of this without, in my mind, really redefining the sacraments in a way that makes them not sacraments.[17]

[75] **David Han:** I think, Michael, when I listened to your response, I thought your response was right on target representing certain segments of Christianity. But I thought the point that you made was not so much about taking sacraments symbolically or the physical aspect of them. I thought what was important about what you said was about the presence of the body. And when you when you say the word "body," you did not simply mean physicality, but you mean the community of God, the corporate nature of these practices. So I do not mean that the online community is not a community. I think someone said earlier the term "community" is being defined differently. I think that I as an individual is always at the center of what is being done. So the sense of community has to be redefined.

[76] When we do sacramental practices, and we consider the presence the body, not as tertiary significance, but one of the crucial aspect of sacramental practices, it is not something that one does individually to himself or herself. It is done to and for the whole community. So you are being received for Baptism, for example. What I teach in my theology classes is that it's not just about you, it's about the whole community. It's an experience of the whole community of faith. So if one does that, where they preside, whoever that person might be, it still becomes individualistic. It doesn't become the corporate experience where the community of faith by witnessing what is going on or participating in that particular event of that individual being baptized, goes through this spiritual experience together and relives the narratives of the scripture. So the presence of the body, which speaks to the corporate nature of the sacramental practices, is something that the virtual church has to think through in terms of how the virtual church would speak to that when they go on this creative way of practicing sacraments.

[77] **Jay Kranda:** I would just add real quickly that, first off, language is really important. For sure, church history is littered with us fighting over these words and defining them. And I know as somebody who went through seminary, I learned a lot about at least what my

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[17] Joe Svancara: Not to mention the dangers that come with the digital world and the rising world of cybercrime, such as identify theft, scamming, hacking, or trolling by others. The online world presents its own dangers that we as pastors need to address to protect our people.

professors thought was and wasn't possible. I would say what's interesting on this conversation is, and I do think this is really important, but as somebody who goes to a very large church and is on staff at a very large church, there was always conversation and around if it was good or bad having that many people. But on the reverse side of that, you swing the other way, a lot of people start redefining how many people need to be there for it to be a church. So if you have five people in a room, can they take Communion in person? And there's been a lot of initiatives where people are using online mediums to launch churches. So, in our case, if we have a thousand small groups that gather in homes with groups of five people, engaging in *ecclesia, koinonia*, and all of that locally, are those churches?

[78] And what I find is a lot of people start to realize that they don't like these very large experiences and then they don't actually even like these very small experiences. And usually I found that comes out of this idea that a church is like a hundred people or whatever that is contextually. So I think these nuances of getting very specific are really important. But I definitely think it kind of drives out what you think a church is. I ideally want people with a group of three to five people. And what's interesting is that even in the large church that I'm part of, I less think about my large church and I think about the three other couples that I'm doing life with. And so our church gets people into these small groups. We have fifteen kids or something between all of us, and that's my church. Can online media spur on that and encourage that? I know we're getting into the digital only, but I think there's a lot of that decentralizing thing that's really important. And can those groups do Communion and Baptism? Yeah. That becomes really easy in my point of view.[18]

[79] **Justin Murff:** And I think, on the sacramental perspective, one of the questions we want to consider is also the function and the role of the Holy Spirit in that moment and in that action. And if you're blessing the sacraments, is it you that's doing it, is there a magic wand that we're waving or a magic moment? Or is it really the work of the Holy Spirit in that moment? And so can Holy Spirit work as effectively in the sanctuary of your church in that moment as he can if we're doing this all online? And so those are some of the questions that I'm not proposing an answer to either way, I'm just saying it's what we're wrestling with.

[80] **Darrell Bock:** Justin, I'm going to reinforce the question by asking you a different way. God is present in the midst of these connections that we have virtually online because he's bigger than anyone space than any one of us occupies. And so the idea that someone administering or overseeing something from one location connected digitally to someone else in another location, that somehow there's a disconnect there, seems to me to be a problem. Spiritually, in light of God's presence being in both of those locations simultaneously, and with an audience around it because it is for the body and not just an

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[18] Jay Kranda: Here was story on USA Today about online church:
https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/2019/05/02/churches-add-apps-vr-and-online-services-engage-millennials/3538527002/?fbclid=IwAR1_kqBRJjvSG9C72WeLJNv7O9DKnvi-p8ugpF2n-CmY3D9xkpHfwae5U5o

individual exchange, is something. I think we're so used to conceiving as a space as confined space, an embodiment as confined in in location. And I'm not sure that's a necessity. So when we get to the self-administration, for example, I'm in a church in which someone is overseeing that that exchange during the Lord's Supper, but I am actually the one putting the bread in my mouth and in the drink in my mouth. There's a sense in which I'm self-administering aspects of what is going on, even in the midst of someone else signifying what is not self-administered. Now the beauty of this conversation is that Michael and I are actually located in the same space, so we can continue this more privately down the road. But I do think those things are worth thinking about as we raise these kinds of questions.

[81] Justin Murff: So in the interest of time, and I feel like we have just not even gotten through the appetizer on this discussion, but I think there's a lot of opportunity to engage more. And if that's something that you would like to do in a particular area, as we send out what we can send out, I know I personally would be really interested in communicating and continuing the dialogue further. How Dr. Armstrong and I first connected on this is that the foundation I work for is interested in compiling a practical guidebook for digital churches and for those who are looking at doing digital ministry so that we as the funding community in the ministry space can make those right funding decisions well and so we can give the ministry partners that we work with the best practicalities and tools and recommendations going forward. If that's something you would have any interest in discussing or maybe you have something already that you feel like would be a great resource for us to use, I'd love to continue that conversation with you. But I'm going to now turn it back over to Dr. Armstrong and let him close us out.

[82] Jonathan Armstrong: Justin, I just want to say thank you so much for your facilitation and for bringing some great people to the table as well. Our thanks are to you all for making this conversation possible, we're extremely grateful. So thank you so much for joining us. Father Clancy, can I tap you on the shoulder to close us out with a prayer please.

[83] Tim Clancy: Sure. Thank you. Dear Lord we pray that you shed your light and your energy as we discern how to move forward in this space in serving your people and fulfilling your Great Commission. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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