A Biblical Reflection on the Church as a Digital Community

By John Sweetman (Interim Director of the Qld Baptist Movement)

There are many benefits of digital church. For example, we can communicate more effortlessly, we can use time more efficiently, we can minister without expensive buildings, we can reach more people, and we can build community with no geographical limitations.

But before we freely embrace digital church, we need to engage with Scripture on the ramifications of digital community and its possible impact on the nature of church and discipleship.

This paper is my attempt to reflect biblically on some key issues impacting digital church. Of course, the Bible does not directly address digital church, so I am reliant on extrapolating guidelines from biblical principles and examples. These are my understandings and opinions, and not those of the QB Movement.

Purposes of the Church

There are five basic purposes of the church.
1. Worship: honouring and pleasing God with both our actions and our praise/prayer, both individually and corporately.
2. Discipling: making disciples and equipping them to minister.
3. Community: growing community through living with, loving and serving each other.
4. Evangelism: sharing the gospel with those who are living independent from God.
5. Service (of our neighbour): bringing justice, grace and healing to our neighbours, our community and our world.

I am separating these purposes for the convenience of this discussion, but of course they overlap and integrate. For example, is helping my neighbour worship or evangelism or service? Well it contributes to all of these purposes and more. But while they overlap, each of the above purposes has a different focus that needs to be considered and that's why I have used these categories.

If the church is to become a digital community, it must be able to fulfil each of these purposes without physical presence. I will briefly examine the possibility of achieving each purpose digitally.

1. Worship

Spiritual worship involves offering ourselves as living sacrifices to God and therefore following God's will (Rom. 12:1-2). This is possible without a physical community of Christians as those in social isolation would attest. Jesus told the Samaritan woman that true worship would not revolve around a place but would involve a heart attitude - Spirit and truth (John 4:21-24).

But the early Christians did come together to worship. While the Scripture does not call their gatherings "worship," they did sing and share (1 Cor. 14:26) and participate in the Lord's Supper together (1 Cor. 11:17-26). Physical gathering had a vital role. This corporate dimension of worship is more difficult to replicate online where people have a tendency to become observers rather than participants.

A major issue for corporate worship is meaningful presence and participation. This involves preparing our hearts, bringing our gifts, and being aware that we are part of the body together as we glorify God. We cannot be consuming passively or multitasking distractedly. That is not worship.

However, while it may be a challenge, involvement in corporate worship does not appear to be precluded by digital media. Many of us have corporately worshipped with a choir singing the Messiah or a Hillsong worship band on YouTube or with a congregation watching a video sermon. Certainly, large number are not needed for corporate worship as Paul and Silas showed in a Philippian gaol (Acts 16:25).

It should be noted that the importance of meeting together is highlighted by the writer of Hebrews (10:25). But this is not directly applied to worshipping together but occurs in the context of spurring each other on to love and good deeds, so it applies more to the church purpose of "Community" (see below).

Aspects of worship that involve physical touch seem to be particularly difficult to replicate digitally in a meaningful way. One example is baptism (Acts 8:38) and another is laying on hands (2 Tim. 1:6).

Conclusion: Individual worship involves obedience and praise which is not limited by a digital environment or physical separation. However, corporate worship involves action (e.g. communion), prayer, involvement, a sense of togetherness, responses, expression of praise, submission and an awareness of God's presence. This is more challenging to achieve digitally. Therefore, digital church would need to focus intentionally on developing these aspects of corporate worship. Baptism and laying on hands are particularly problematic. But while there are difficulties and live physical worship is much preferred, I can't see Scripture ruling out digital church. Paul in prison appeared to remain part of the worshipping communities he identified with despite his physical absence (e.g. Eph. 1:13-23), although he never intended this to be a permanent state of affairs.

2. Making disciples

To "make disciples" is a major calling of the church (Matt. 28:19). This includes "teaching them to obey everything" that Jesus commanded (28:20). This calls for the equipping function of the church.

All Jesus' discipling was done through his physical presence with people, but not so with Paul. While Paul had an impact on many people personally (see Rom. 16), a significant amount of his equipping was done at a distance through the writing of letters. For example, Timothy was a beneficiary of both Paul's personal presence mentoring and his insightful letter-writing. And of course, we continue to be equipped by Paul's Spirit-inspired equipping letters.

There are many aspects of equipping that can be done more effectively through digital media. Helpful teaching can be disseminated more easily and more widely online (e.g. podcasts). Christians can gain access to equipping resources whenever and wherever they have a need. They don't have to wait for a Sunday service or go to a special venue. As the printing press brought a new wave of equipping to the Reformation church, so the digital age offers a new multiplication of equipping resources for the contemporary church.

But a challenge of digital discipling is that the lack of physical presence often (but not necessarily) produces a lack of transparency and accountability. The character of digital equippers (1 Tim. 3:1-7) is difficult to assess. The power of life touching life (Phil. 3:17) is reduced. Holding people accountable is more difficult. Sometimes people are more open online, but generally it is easier to hide information that is uncomfortable, and this hinders true discipleship.

Jesus said that his disciples must, "deny themselves, take up their cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). This has been difficult to achieve in an individualistic, materialistic culture that focuses on the happiness of individuals. But it is especially difficult to attain in the digital world where consumerism is rife.

3. Community

Acts 2:42-47 gives a glimpse into the seminal Christian community. Of course, this community didn't seem to last all that long. From the epistles, we find that early church communities were plagued with the same selfishness and conflict we face in churches today. But still, Luke gives us a glimpse of what grace-centred, Spirit-empowered community looks like. People certainly were together a lot – in and out of each other's homes, eating together, meeting together in the temple, and sharing everything.

We live in an isolated, individualistic, pressured world in which the constant physical gathering described in Acts 2 is challenging. Digital media can actually help us forge this close-knit, enmeshed, interdependent type of community exemplified in the early Jerusalem church. It can support much more frequent communication. It can facilitate get-togethers from scattered geographical locations. It can enable more sharing of lives and personal information. At their best, Facebook and WhatsApp can facilitate some form of Acts 2 community. If close-knit community is to be achieved in the modern Western church, digital media will most likely have a crucial role.

But God's eternal community is certainly a presence community. That's why we need new bodies (1 Cor. 15:35-44). Our eternal bodies will be different from our present bodies in that they will be perfect, but they will be real bodies. God's intention is that we will live together in bodily form. While our church communities may be only pale imitations of God's eternal community, digital communities are even less representative. A community that lacks any physical presence falls well short of God's ideal.

I don't think that such a digital community is impossible. Paul felt very strongly connected with church communities despite his physical absence. For example, he writes to the Colossians from prison, "For though I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit and delight to see how orderly you are and how firm your faith in Christ" (Col. 2:5). Here Paul refers to a lack of physical presence and yet a sense of spiritual presence. This could be possible in digital community as God's Spirit in individuals brings loving connection and community without physical presence.

It is interesting that John, who had been exiled to the Island of Patmos (probably a Roman penal colony), was "in the Spirit on the Lord's Day" (Rev. 1:10) when he received his revelation for the seven churches. Such language suggests a strong connection to the worship practices of the early church even in social isolation. Again, it appears that physical separation does not preclude spiritual connection with the church community.

However, we have been created for physical community. God created a helper for man because it was not good for man to be alone (Gen. 2:18). Scripture especially notes a physical connection between man and woman in the woman's creation (Gen. 2:21-23) culminating in a "one flesh" relationship (Gen. 2:24). The language is drenched with physicality. Our relationships and the resultant community that arises from them have been designed by God to involve a physical dimension which we must not abandon in a digital world.

such community without any physical presence remains a pale imitation of God's ideal and must always be seen as such. When circumstances prevent the establishment of physical community, we should work hard to include the isolated in digital community. But this form of community can only be seen as a step on the journey. Our goal is to involve the isolated in physical community whenever, wherever and however possible.

4. Evangelism

The next two purposes of the church are often combined under mission. I have chosen to separate them to ensure that both these aspects of mission are considered carefully. But as James (2:14-25) emphasises, they should be deeply interwoven.

I think that gospelising or evangelism is an area where the church must exercise great caution and great freedom. We need to be extremely protective of the content of the gospel – it remains clear and unchanging, focused on the death and resurrection of Jesus and its implications. We guard this gospel without compromise (2 Tim. 1:13-14). We hold to this gospel unashamedly (Rom. 1:16) even if this involves suffering (2 Tim. 1:8).

But we have great freedom in our strategies for communicating the gospel. Paul covers this in 1 Cor. 9:19-23 where he concludes, "To the weak I become weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some." Paul is not saying that the end justifies the means (that would compromise the gospel), but that he tries to remove all barriers standing in the way of people hearing the gospel. He looks for all possible means to present the gospel even when this involves considerable personal flexibility and sacrifice.

The digital world offers increased opportunities for sharing the gospel. Its potential reach is incredible. It is far more accessible to seekers than physical meetings or literature. It calls for less initial sacrifice for those exploring faith. It allows more direct presentations of truth. If the church takes Paul's advice on mission seriously, it should pursue digital mission wherever possible.

However, the gospel is still best presented by physical people whose lives reflect the truth they are sharing and through a living community that embodies God's grace (John 13:35, Acts 2:47). Some of this can be seen online but there is nothing like the whole thing.

Conclusion: As long as our use of digital media does not compromise the gospel, we should be taking advantage of the opportunities it offers to reach new audiences and individuals with the good news of Jesus. This is our calling as evangelicals. Almost everyone is online. The church needs to be in that mission field, presenting the gospel in ways that are relevant and winsome. But this should not cause us to neglect or diminish our calling to evangelise our physical neighbours.

5. Service (of our neighbour)

The church community not only has a calling to live by kingdom values but also to take these values into our community and culture by our actions and influence (Matt. 25:31-46). We are the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matt. 5:13-16). This involves serving our neighbours and community, especially the needy, and standing for justice, especially for the oppressed.

In our individualistic culture, it is easy for this essential dimension of our faith to be lost. This is especially true in the consumeristic digital world where choice rules, and commitment is light.

One of my concerns about digital church is that it could exacerbate the division between the spiritual and physical aspects of our lives. This is already prevalent in the church. Many Christians (especially men) see little connection between their spiritual lives and their workday lives. So in the digital

church, it is essential to emphasise that spiritual life cannot be confined to the digital world. Loving our neighbour requires far more than liking a comment or offering a word of encouragement online or signing a petition.

Christian faith calls for a life of sacrifice and service. This is most naturally caught through example (1 Cor. 11:1) and lived in local community. Both of these elements are more difficult to capture in the digital world, but not impossible. Digital church needs to take the need to embody Christian faith in service seriously and call for lives of personified service providing models and accountability.

However, while many social needs in our local and wider community do require a physical response, the digital world offers great opportunity to raise awareness of needs, call for action, exert pressure for justice, build alliances for righteousness, and provide resources.

Conclusion: Service of our neighbour must be embodied. It cannot remain online. The digital church needs to work hard to ensure this is understood and actioned. As James 2:26 says, "Faith without deeds is dead." But the church's calling to be salt and light also compels us to take advantage of the opportunities that digital community and communication provide to pursue service and justice.

Final Conclusions

1. I didn't find any biblical command or calling that would rule out the church as a digital community. It is not ideal and should not be seen as such. But as a first move towards following Jesus or a solution to social isolation or a step towards integration in a physical community, it provides opportunity to fulfil all of the purposes of the church to some degree. However, I am uncomfortable with the goal of a purely digital church. It does not sufficiently recognise our creation as physical beings designed for physical community. It cannot be fully holistic.

2. Digital communication offers considerable opportunities to the contemporary church that need to be integrated into our ministry. These include corporate worship for the socially isolated, more targeted and effective equipping, more frequent networking and community-building, a greater reach for the gospel, and stronger social influence. The church cannot afford to neglect these God-given opportunities.

3. The church must guard against the temptations and challenges of the digital world and ensure that our values and gospel are not compromised by the medium. These challenges include individualism, consumerism, shallowness, selfishness, spectator mentality, irresponsibility, intellectualism, and liberalism. If the church is not proactive in addressing these issues in the digital space, I fear that the journey towards digital church will lead to a growing immaturity of the church.

Admission: I'm a Baptist

In the above discussion and conclusions, I have viewed and interpreted Scripture through a Baptist lens. This paper aligns with our Baptist ecclesiology in at least three ways:
1. The conclusions are personal. I don't purport to speak for every Baptist church. I do think that these views will represent the majority of Queensland Baptist churches, but certainly not all. There is no compulsion to agree, just to arrive at your own biblical conclusions. This is baptistic.
2. The discussion is biblical. I have seriously explored what Scripture says and have attempted to place my personal views under Scripture. This is baptistic.
3. The final conclusions call for flexible forms. One of the characteristics of Baptists throughout history has been the flexibility of many of our forms and structures of church which has allowed us to minister effectively in new situations. This is baptistic.

Questions to Consider

1. Do you agree with John's conclusions? Where does your theology differ? Are you more or less open to digital church? What is your biblical justification for this?

2. If you had unlimited resources, how would you expand your use of digital media to further the purposes of your church? What would you like to do? This is your chance to dream. Possible areas include:
   - Streaming services
   - Facilitating online or hybrid small groups
   - Offering online discipling and equipping courses
   - Providing more online teaching for church members
   - Developing online mentoring programs
   - Encouraging and supporting more participative community through digital platforms
   - Providing online evangelistic resources or programs
   - Offering online resources for the community e.g. English classes, parenting support, financial direction
   - Exerting greater social influence through digital platforms

3. With limited resources, you can't do everything you would like in the digital space. What are your priorities?

4. What will you proactively put in place to counteract the significant challenges for digital Christians like consumeristic faith, self-focus, lack of commitment, poor discipleship, lack of accountability, lack of transparency, lack of community, lack of service?

5. What pathways do you have for your digital community to become a physical community?