

# Our Post-Pandemic Ecclesial Meetings

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The last 15 years has seen an increase in efforts within Ontario and some of the US ecclesias to bring about unity between the amended ecclesias and some of the various other fellowships, such as Church of God of the Abrahamic Faith. While this is a hot button topic that is not the focus of this study, it is somewhat tangential in the sense that the recent pandemic has forced us to ask what really are the essential parameters that govern our physical meetings and how this applies in the world of our virtual meeting? This question seems particularly relevant to me personally after having attended a Bible School in Guyana over the Easter holiday weekend for the first time in 18 years!

Ever since the start of the pandemic in March of 2020, we have not met for the memorial service in our 'home' ecclesia in Ottawa, Ontario. During this time, we have met with members online starting in Boston but more frequently with members in Georgetown, Guyana which is my hometown ecclesia. This online forum has allowed for many brothers and sisters who were formerly based in Guyana and now reside throughout the world, to fellowship together on Sundays, meet for Bible Classes on Wednesdays, attend Brother/Sisters classes, mutual improvement, first principles, CYC and even thanksgiving events!

For my family who are normally part of a small meeting in Ottawa, it has been a pleasant surprise and an unexpected gift. During this time, there have been three baptisms in our Ottawa ecclesia but we are yet to be able to meet together regularly. Instead have been breaking bread as family 'bubbles' connected virtually, while sharing in spirit the same bread and wine as we pray, read, sing and exhort one another.

For the first time in my life, geographical constraints seem to have become a non-factor in determining where and with whom we meet. In fact, the entire process seems heavily driven by

our individual preferences of ecclesias we feel most comfortable with or wish to support in some way.

While this was and continues to be a huge blessing given the alternative of being somewhat totally isolated over the past 13 months, is it sustainable in the long run? Is it fulfilling and (does it meet) the biblical definition of fellowship as “a sharing, communion or joint partnership”? What are the pros and cons? Is our old concept of fellowship now a relic of the past? Has this unforeseen global catastrophe removed the relevance of ecclesial ‘membership’ and, by extension, made the need for unity based on the wording of statements of faith a moot point?

### What are the scriptural parameters for fellowship?

Acts 2:46 speaks of one of the early first century practices of breaking bread, which is a component of fellowship. The NLT says –

*They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity. (Acts 2:46, NLT)*

The NIV says,

*Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts. (Acts 2:46, NIV)*

Was the temple simply a meeting point after which they went in a big group to have multiple breaking of bread services followed by a big potluck? Given that in the previous verses there were more than 3000 members, this would seem impractical. But would be possible if they were meeting up in the temple and after the meeting would disperse in groups to break bread, as well as sharing their meals, in a smaller setting.

This model has been used in many of our ecclesias, except that we were able to worship without fear, share in the emblems and then have what has become known as ‘hospitality’ afternoons of some sort, where groups go back to someone’s home. I am sure that we would agree that our meetings have been immensely enriched by these gatherings that have served to strengthen and deepen the bonds of love in Christ. I cannot think of a substitute for this in a virtual world, beyond meeting briefly in breakout rooms on Zoom or eating in front of a Zoom camera with other members. Without these less formal meetings, how do we develop genuine

love and care for each other and most importantly strengthen each other as we are exhorted in Hebrews:

*Wherefore lift up the hands that hang down, and the failing knees; and make straight paths for your feet, that that which is lame be not turned aside; but that rather it may be healed? (Heb 12:12–13 DBY)*

How do we fulfil Galatians 6:2 which demands that we bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ? This is written in the context of the need to strengthen those in our ecclesias who are struggling against sin and its associated trials.

It is not surprising that, in addition to Acts 2:42 (where they were devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer), God caused it to be written that the practical aspect of meeting together and caring for each other in a familial way was also present. Heb 10:25 in the NET Bible says,

*not abandoning our own meetings, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging each other, and even more so because you see the day drawing near. (Heb 10:25 NET)*

Online meetings have been great for receiving teaching and some encouragement. Who can fault the newfound ability to Zoom to aid struggling ecclesias throughout the world? Who would fault the opportunities that enable many brethren — in isolation, at work, in poor health and even those travelling — to join in various meetings? I can attest to having seen some isolated brethren that have met regularly with us that I have not seen in about 35 years!

However, I don't find the online gathering comparable to meeting together and feeling the warmth of fellowship. Having enjoyed the former, I find meeting online a very poor — though currently necessary — substitute.

I would like to make it clear that I do think it has been a huge blessing, as the alternative in these times of isolation would have been a disaster. However, given that this blessing is here, how should it be incorporated into our fellowship in the days, months, and years ahead, so that it remains a blessing and does not become a curse?

## What are the dangers?

Meeting online has allowed for a level of anonymity which was not present before. I have found that some ecclesias have made a practice of all putting on their cameras and chatting

before and after the formal part of the meeting. I have also seen others where the cameras are seldom switched on or participants join via a streaming service such as YouTube. In both cases, there is absolutely no interaction between the those that are joined in this manner and the rest of the meeting. Participants ‘attend’ and leave ‘before one could know another’— to borrow the expression from Ruth 3:14! There is no support given or received, no social contact, no help with accountability, etc. It is a form of worship that can seem appealing when we don’t feel like seeing anyone — or perhaps felt unwelcome — but is this a long-term way to serve God? No one can see what is in the heart of another — but we can (and should) judge ourselves.

*The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? (1Cor 10:16)*

The word communion has a connotation of intimacy and joint participation. Does it fulfil this requirement to *share in the body of Christ* when we are there “at meeting” but not really there? How does this fit with Paul’s exhortation in 1 Corinthians 12:25-27, which mentions that there should be no schism in the body but members should have the same care one for another? Would we be able — in the long run — to develop and grow a strong unity with our ‘virtual’ ecclesia so that we rejoice with those who rejoice and share in the sufferings of those in pain?

Another danger for me personally has been a sliding in my devotion of time during meeting that focused solely on the meeting — without the need to be physically being present with my brothers and sisters, at a set time each week, where the ‘world’ was shut out. At home there are times that the daily routines have encroached on time periods that were usually devoted to being at the meeting. It may start with breakfast running a bit late and the opening prayer being missed. Or perhaps something else coming along, and the readings being put aside. And eventually, meeting gets reduced to being parts of the exhortation and the breaking of bread. Is this an offering we would willingly give to a meeting with our boss, let alone the God of heaven and earth?

Yet another danger for me, and some like myself, who may be introverts, is that the new option of meeting online without having to be out of our comfort zones is very enticing. Could this be a factor that might cause some to cling to an online manner of meeting?

## Is there a better way going forward?

I am reminded of Christ's meeting with the Samaritan woman, and how he responded to her concern that the patriarchs worshipped on the mountain there while the Jews demanded that all worship in Jerusalem. Christ's response was as follows:

*Jesus saith unto her, Woman, believe me, the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father... But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God [is] a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth. (John 4:21, 23–24)*

The truth of this statement is still relevant today as we consider our changing platform, and what our post-pandemic meetings may look like. It is irrefutable that having an online option will continue to be of huge benefit to many of our brethren across the world, especially the aged and infirm. This suggests that it should be maintained as a regular option if possible, especially as even though there have been recorded exhortations and bible classes available online, having a devoted time each week is more likely to result in us actually taking part in them, and listening to these exhortations or Bible studies. There is also the benefit of us serving and being served by each other,

*Iron sharpeneth iron; so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend. (Prov 27:17)*

Isn't this one of our goals so that we may see Christ in each other, and he may see a reflection of himself in us at His return?

There is an old proverb that says you can bring a horse to water, but you can't make him drink. This is relevant to many concerns that exist over whether an online platform may be misused, and members may somewhat flagrantly opt for online meetings even when in person meetings are available. This is a real concern, but we cannot 'police' those around us to conform to our preferences. We should continue to encourage as many as possible to make every effort to attend in person if it is safe and allowed by the local health authorities. We can exhort and encourage by pointing out the benefits of being there in person. However, it comes down to those who are coming to worship — to their decision and recognition of a need or want to do so in a spirit of truth, as John again mentions in 1 John 4:6.

If this transition back to meeting in person is done effectively (with those who cannot make it joining in online), what a huge blessing it will be for our ecclesias in the months and years ahead until our Lord returns!

For many who have felt like the blind and lame who came to Jesus in the temple, meeting online feels like an opportunity to meet with Christ and enjoy fellowship that was missing for many years. Consider Christ's words in Matthew 21 that would have felt welcoming to many who were shut out by the practices of the temple leaders. He said,

*And said unto them, It is written, My house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves. And the blind and the lame came to him in the temple; and he healed them. (Matt 21:13-14)*

Blocking of the blind and lame was a misapplication of David's sarcastic comment in 2 Sam 5:8, where he had been told that even the blind and lame would be able to defend the city of Jebus. David referred to the defenders of the city against whom he had to fight, as the 'hated blind and lame'. Unfortunately the Jewish authorities continued to prevent the blind and lame from entering the temple after this time. Jesus did the opposite, however, and brought in the blind and lame and healed them there.

Imagine what this platform can do for our "blind and lame" brethren, many of whom felt they could not face the prospect of being present in the ecclesia? Imagine the number of families with young children who can now attend Bible classes regularly, without worry over the commute or interruption of school schedules? Imagine the support and encouragement for many ecclesias who have been struggling figuratively to walk? Imagine the Sunday School and CYC gatherings not in tens but of a few thousand? Imagine sharing in the fellowship of getting to know, encourage, and be encouraged by many in far off lands? Imagine the worldwide choir when technology allows for real-time mixing of our voices in praise to our God?

The hybrid option of our in-person meetings — along with an online presence — will certainly bring much benefit to our community. However, I would like to reiterate that while the option of meeting online can, and should be, used to strengthen our ecclesias, it would be a huge step back in our fellowship if it is made the standard way of meeting, rather than the exception that accommodates those that are unable to meet otherwise. While not impossible to meet virtually and fulfil our calling in Christ, it can be a severe disadvantage to our walk. Many like

myself who have grown used to this new way of worshipping together need to take this into account. The words of God through Haggai are sobering,

*Is it time for you, O ye, to dwell in your sealed houses, and this house lie waste? Now therefore thus saith the LORD of hosts; Consider your ways. (Hag 1:4-5)*

We need to consider our ways, and carefully decide how best we can build the house of God. Are we willing to place the goal of building His house at the forefront of our meeting together?

We are at a critical juncture in our history, with much opportunity, but also much danger. Unlike the Spanish Flu pandemic nearly a century ago, technology has allowed each member to now have a digital option of where to meet weekly based on preferences, beliefs or even friendships. As a community, we can easily find our fellowship reduced to (or possibly exposed as) a loosely affiliated, fractured group of believers, if we don't prayerfully manage this post-pandemic transition period in our history. This pandemic may have caught us by surprise but maybe, just maybe, despite the many sad losses during this time, God may use it to bring back some of our lost ones and enable us to be a more vibrant and prepared flock that is secure in His fold, before His Son's soon return.