**Will the Church’s Digital Wave**

**Continue after the Coronavirus?**

**By Trevin Wax**

I’ve never been more thankful and more dissatisfied with technology.

In a season of being bound to my home, I’m thankful for technology that allows for communication, meetings, and church livestreaming. We can’t visit family members and close friends, but we can see each other on FaceTime. We can’t meet with our life group this week, but we can still open God’s Word and discuss eternal truth via Zoom. We can’t gather in worship, but we can still hear songs and sermons through livestream.

Even as technology makes communication easier, it can make community harder. For all the advances we’ve made in finding new and better ways to communicate, we cannot replicate flesh-and-blood community online. If anything, watching a livestream of a worship service online only reminds me of how insufficient technology is. A FaceTime call with my brother in Korea makes me want more and more to see him in person.

In-Person to Online

LifeWay Research shows a massive swing toward adoption of video communication for churches across the country. It’s no surprise that church leaders rushed to provide some sort of pastoral care via video once gatherings were shut down.

Some wonder if this shift will remain permanent, with church members preferring a livestream in the comfort of their living room instead of gathering physically with other believers. Will believers get used to sermons “on demand” rather than in person?

I believe the opposite will be the case. It’s likely that the coronavirus crisis that has hindered believers from meeting together has helped people realize, perhaps more powerfully than before, the utter insufficiency of technology in replacing in-person interaction.

Livestreaming, sermon podcasts, videos, and FaceTime—at their best, these can enhance what goes on in real community, but they are not a substitute for the real thing, no matter how much we rely on them. Churches can go online without becoming online churches.

Analog Church

A new book by Jay Y. Kim, Analog Church: Why We Need Real People, Places, and Things in the Digital Age, presses in on the inadequacies of technology when it comes to discipleship in our digital era. He pushes hard against the notion that communities of faith can be sustained simply by delivering sermons or songs online. He urges us to watch our language, to avoid confusing the language of community with the language of commodity.

“An ‘online church’ is more a product to be consumed than it is a people to be joined.

Community isn’t about getting a product out there but about gathering people wherever they are. Yet, so many of our churches continue to push into online spaces and call it community and connection” (95).

Values of the Digital Age

The shelter-at-home orders that shut down most public places, including churches, across the country have forced Americans to live at the extreme end of a trajectory that was already becoming true of our society: isolation as families or individuals. In recent years, we’ve been self-isolating more and more, content with the devices that keep us constantly distracted. Kim writes:

“This is the ultimate paradox of the digital age: at the moment in human history when technology allows us to be more connected than ever, we are so very far apart, to the point that our very understanding of ‘community’ has devolved into a sort of collection of isolated individuals” (86).

Kim spends some time unpacking the values of the digital age: speed, choices, and individualism. The speed of the digital age has made us impatient. The choices of the digital age have made us shallow. The individualism of the digital age has made us isolated. Our technological tools are not neutral; they shape our expectations and exert a formative influence on the kind of people we are becoming.

Recognizing the Limits of Technology

Now that we have experienced a technology-only kind of church for several weeks, we should be more aware of the promises and drawbacks of digital connection. We can see the benefits and the weaknesses of this way of life.

Kim is clear on the positives:

“At their best, social media and other digital spaces can be wonderful initiating spaces that lead to true human connection, but they can never become home for those connections; they’ll always fall short and leave us wanting. When I FaceTime with my wife and kids (our digital gathering space when I’m away), it’s a wonderful benefit of technology—but ultimately it only makes me eager to get home and give them real hugs. That’s digital at its best—increasing our appetite for the real, analog thing” (20).

That’s the key—that we don’t lose sight of the real thing. And I expect that churches, having been put in the strange place of being forbidden to gather, will likely find a renewed enthusiasm for being in person with God’s people in the future. As René Breuel, a Brazilian pastor serving in hard-hit Italy, reminds us: “A video stream and text messages are no substitute for embodied life.”

In this season of isolation, let’s not forget that we long for gathering, for in-person contact, because we were created for relationship. We were created in the image of a triune God. Let’s “invite people to put down their screens and show up with their whole selves” because we understand that God created us not to be in isolation, but to be in community.

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/will-the-churchs-digital-wave-continue-after-the-coronavirus/>

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This article may not be written by an Apostolic author, but it contains many excellent principles and concepts that can be adapted to most churches. As the old saying goes, “Eat the meat. Throw away the bones.”