

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

15 Reasons Your Soul Needs Gathered Worship, Not Just a Livestream

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The pandemic continues. Physical attendance in many churches remains sparse—or at least sparser than before. For various reasons, some may need to continue staying home. But other low-risk or fully vaccinated congregants seem to prefer the livestream far longer than we expected.

Amid these various circumstances and uncertainties, we need to lead our people well. Part of that means we need to remind our people of what we lose when we don't physically gather in worship. Below, I've written 15 reflections on all that is lost when we choose to worship from the couch instead of the pew.



1. As Bonhoeffer said in *Life Together*, “The physical presence of other believers is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer.” The mere presence of other Christians has a fortifying effect on our souls, beneath what we’re even able to consciously recognize. That’s one reason the Bible exhorts us to meet together. We are Christ’s very body, organically connected to each other, the life and strength of Christ himself flowing into us *through* one another.

2. A virtual worship gathering is one-way participation, not two-way. You’re receiving, but you can’t give. You are seeing those leading worship, preaching, praying—but they can’t see you. They don’t see your eyes, your body, your solidarity. At best you’re a number, piping in on a livestream.

3. We use our screens for work and for entertainment. But corporate worship is neither. Watching worship on our screens can subtly dilute the special-ness of corporate worship, as the very medium tends to mush it into other more mundane realities of life like work and entertainment.

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4. Coming in for worship takes more effort. You have to get out of your pjs and put on jeans. You have to get in the car. If you have kids, you have to go through the routine of getting them all presentable and into the minivan. Up here in the north, you have snow and ice and cold to deal with. *Good.* We're teaching our kids, and we're training our own souls, to value corporate worship. The very effort to come in trains us in a healthy direction, reinforcing the irreplaceable value of gathering with other Christians.

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5. There's not only the worship service itself; there's all the hallway time, the [passing conversations](#), the wave across the sanctuary, the smile in the parking lot, the greeting while washing your hands in the restroom. All of that is lost in virtual worship from home. Instead of getting in the car at 9:10 for the 9:30 service, arriving at 9:25, and having several minutes of passing fellowship—along with the unhurried fellowship and encouragement after the service—you open your laptop at 9:29 and close it one second after the benediction. A protracted period of virtual worship weakens our relationships.

6. There's something else that's harder to articulate, though it's related to the above point. Mentally and psychologically, there's a certain "ramp-up" as you drive to church, park, walk into the building, settle into your seat or into the pew. And there's a certain reflective "ramp-down" as you leave the sanctuary, drive home, and reflect on what just happened. All of that is lost when the ramp-up and ramp-down is replaced with opening your laptop and closing it. Corporate worship must be prepared for and then absorbed, and going in physically helps facilitate that in a way that's almost certainly diluted with couch worship.

7. Prayer. With whom can we pray if we're staying home? With a spouse, perhaps. But we need other Christians to pray with. We need other Christians to pray for. We want to keep learning how to move through life as if God is actually there, because he is. That growth atrophies in protracted isolation.

8. Encouragement. We grossly underestimate [the spiritual power of encouragement](#), both for the encourager and for the encouraged. One reason we gather is to encourage, that is, to build courage into one another. I greet a friend; he asks how my week was; I mention a challenge I'm navigating; he says, "Hang in there; God is with you." A 30-second exchange, come and gone just like that—and my soul just got enlarged.

9. It's harder for your preacher if you are home. He can't see you. He knows some of you are out there, and he's trying to acknowledge you from the pulpit as he glances at the livestream camera from time to time. But he doesn't know if you're nodding along or nodding off. He has zero feedback from you. You could be jumping up and down with excitement and he'd have no idea. Healthy preaching is dialogical—your preacher is

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feeding off of your eyes, your nods, your attentiveness, as he preaches. He needs to see you.

10. And the preaching is harder for *you* if you're home. Sitting on your couch watching your preacher as a head on a screen simply isn't as enjoyable as sitting 20 feet away, in a room with better acoustics, surrounded by dozens of other Christians who are also listening with you. Attentiveness to a 2-D preacher necessarily wanes compared to a 3-D preacher.

11. In corporate worship inside your church, not everything is scripted. You'll greet someone you didn't expect to see. A visitor might sit near you and you'll get the opportunity to welcome them. You might even play a role in leading someone to Christ. From your couch, none of that happens. Everything is scripted. It's nearly impossible to have a fortuitous interaction.

12. When you're in the sanctuary, you can't press mute. You can't pause it to grab another cup of coffee. You can't turn the volume up or down. You're less tempted to pull your phone out and see who just texted you. When you're at church, you're wonderfully captured by the environment. *You are trapped, with other Christians, before God.* That's good.

13. Singing. Perhaps you can hear the congregation sing through your speakers at home, but we all know it's not the same as hearing the real voices all around you. The same goes for reciting Scripture corporately, or reading a confession of sin in unison, even if through masks. There's a necessary artificiality built in when these things are done with just you and your family from your living room. Your fellow members need to hear you sing. You're strengthening them as they hear your voice. It doesn't matter if you can't carry a tune. Whether they know it or not, you're reinforcing their theology with your voice.

14. Sacraments. We [lose the opportunity](#) to partake of the Lord's Supper if we're home, yet we believe that this is a vital source of spiritual strengthening—not merely a memorial act.

15. Time. The more time goes by, and the more comfortable we get trying to do worship from home, the more "out of shape" we're getting. We're not exercising our corporate worship muscles. The longer we wait, the more normal it will feel for us to do worship from home. For the above reasons, that's less than ideal.

This is not easy for any of us. Let's be patient with each other. Let's love and understand and show grace to each other. But with the requisite safety precautions in place, let's boldly encourage each other to come together for corporate worship.

This virus is bad. I get it. Let's protect our bodies. But not at the expense of our souls.

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