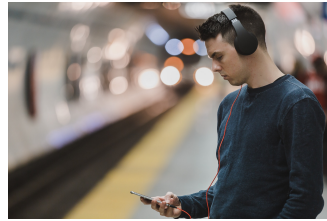


Do We Really Need the Local Church?

Jim Elliff

The down-the-street local church is not the only show in town anymore. We are able to enjoy faith-building messages, listen to the latest Christian music, and explore the rich diversity and variety found in the most noted Christian gatherings, all on our computer or mobile device.



Many local church pastors now say, “The world is my parish,” just as did the horseback-riding evangelist, John Wesley. But they mean this without ever going out of their own studio or auditorium! Some are communicating to tens of thousands.

It is not unusual for savvy web users to feed from many sources—any day, all day! Some listen to Christian radio every waking moment. In fact, you can hear and see Christian leaders on your handheld media device while eating a hamburger in the local fast food restaurant.

For some time we have been losing the aura of significance once automatically assigned to the local church—the attention we had when nothing else much was going on.

We now have to face the truth—most media preachers are more engaging than those who speak in our own church, and we can watch them in our pajamas. Massive church meetings on television are so vivacious and musically stimulating that many simply lose their appetite for the “same ol’ same ol’” of the regular assembly. And the church programs that once seemed so essential for spiritual vitality have become a bother to masses of declared believers. Who really wants to be out one more night missing his favorite TV programming?

Do we really need the local church anymore?

But some benefits are to be found in the local church that not even the best media experience can offer, such as . . .

- **Actual relationships rather than imaginary ones.** Weak as some churches are, they are still made up of living people who come together. The media-engrossed Christian isolates himself from other believers while imagining relationships that are actually not there. This is not living life, but skipping life. I am often saddened by the isolated person who misses out on people. There is no true fellowship except among believers. Once you know it, you will not be satisfied without it.
- **Compassionate care rather than mere talk of concern.** The media pastors talk about their love for their audience, but they will not be there when your

child experiments with drugs, or your spouse dies, or your business goes down the drain. Those in the media audience will not sit at your bedside when you are dying. Radio preachers say they pray for you, but they really don’t know you at all. Remember this: if you live alone, you die alone.

- **Real accountability rather than unchecked liberty.** It may not seem immediately desirable, but accountability is a precious gift. In the local church, if you stray from God, someone is there to bring you back, or even to lovingly discipline you. If you are alone, you may stray deeper and deeper into sin even though you have periodic religious media fixes. Rather, you must subject yourself to the answerability that comes from engaging with real people. If you understand the deceitfulness of sin, you know you need that.
- **Authentic shared worship rather than vicarious viewing of worship.** God promises benefits and blessings to corporate worship, even more so than for individual worship, though we should do both. Yet the isolated virtual Christian only imagines himself worshipping with others as he sits before the monitor. If the professing solo believer were to arrive in heaven one day, he would only then experience what he was made for when he became a believer. He will say, “How could I have missed it?”

Add to the above that the isolated media-only Christian disobeys God by not participating in the ordinance of the Lord’s Supper or the corporate experience of Baptism, and that he refuses to use spiritual gifts and talents which God gave him expressly for edifying his local church, a distinct privilege and responsibility of Christians.

Do we still need the local church? Yes! But its members had better major on what makes it irreplaceable—becoming the loving, caring, worshipping, responsible fellowship it was meant to be. Your church, for instance, can be the most loving church in the world. Nothing can stop you except your own unwillingness. Love, especially in our media saturated day, is immensely attractive and satisfying.

Forget the flash and the showmanship. Don’t even try to compete. Leave that to those media churches enamored with such surface concerns. They soon lose meaning to true believers anyway. Pare away all that is trifling—especially the traditions that have lost their meaning because they were only the last generation’s attempts at being up-to-date. Do what is biblical even if it means changing everything. And then you will have meaning. You will be the local church that nobody can think little of anymore.

“. . . not forsaking our own assembling together . . .” Hebrews 10:25