

Are Online Services Ever Valid?

First, let me say, that in person services should be the goal of every church. We were made as physical beings and should long for the physical presence of others (as Paul longed to be present with his readers, cf. Ro 1:10; 15:23; Ga 4:20; 2 Ti 1:4). The New Testament pictures by example and command the physical gathering together of the saints (Ac 2:42, 46; Heb 10:24, 25). The question is not about what is ideal, but what is possible.

The second thing to be said is this, I do not think there are any easy answers here and I don't judge any church for coming to different conclusions as they seek to faithfully apply Scripture. There are a lot of variables, and those variables even change from region to region. We need to consider all of the data at hand (first, the Biblical data, and then medical, circumstantial, political, etc.), and make the best decision we can in light of that. The following is not an argument that all churches should be doing one thing or the other. It is just some of the relevant Biblical & theological data.

Finally, I should say, this is not all of the Biblical data. I am assuming a certain amount of Biblical and theological literacy in what I am writing. So, some might say, "but what about?" My answer is likely, yes, I see that (whatever "that" is) as basic biblical teaching (for example, *that* we are to meet together, have worship services, led by pastors, etc.)

1. Not Ideal, But Not Invalid

I hesitate to use the language of "improper but valid" for reasons that will become obvious. But, in discussions of baptism there has often been the discussion of an "improper but valid" baptism. That is, there are certain times when a baptism was not performed "the way it ought to be done," but it was not, as a result, completely invalid either.

I hesitate to mention this because never in those discussions is there room for pursuing an improper but valid baptism. It is always a concession. But, I think the point I would want to draw from that here is this, there are times when something is not ideal, but is not therefore invalid.

Now, this is probably a bad place to start, because if you've ever been to a presbytery meeting (or possibly a meeting of any other denomination), you know that there are two opinions on this point. Some think, if it's not in Roberts Rules it is improper *and* invalid. Period. Others think that sometimes we do what is right even when it doesn't quite fit the given form. Which is to say, some people agree with this "not ideal, but not invalid" option and others do not. But, to lay all my cards on the table, I think there is such a category: *not ideal, but not invalid*. That's not an

excuse to engage in *sinful* behavior. But we must see that sometimes the options are not *sin or not sin*, but *ideal or not ideal*, and those are not the same set of options.

2. House Churches & Epistles

Paul clearly wanted to be present with his churches. He repeatedly expresses a longing to that end. He wanted to be in the flesh, in person, to encourage and be encouraged (Ro 1:10–12). But, alas, that was not always possible. Sometimes Paul sent a Timothy or a Titus or an Epaphroditus in his place (1 Co 4:17; 1 Th 3:2; Php 2:19, 25). But that is not the only thing Paul sent to encourage the house churches of the ancient world. Paul also sent letters.

A letter is an interesting thing, because it was a substitute for Paul's physical presence. A letter is a "technological" way of being present. Paul used the technology of the first century to be present with his churches. He would have rathered be physically present. But he couldn't be everywhere at once, so he wrote letters to spread his message throughout the Roman world. By sending letters to house churches Paul was able to bless small communities of believers. Again, Paul knew his letters were no substitute for his physical presence (see all of the verses already quoted). But, sometimes that was the only thing possible. Peter says something similar in 2 Peter 1. As long as he was in the body, he wanted to remind his readers of certain truths by letter, so that even when he put off his body, they would still be able to recall these things to mind (vv. 12–15). He was using the technology of the day to extend his ministry even beyond his death.

There is an analogy today. It is not the same thing for a number of reasons. Pastors are not apostles, for starters. But just as Jesus could say "take up your cross and follow me" without confusing his cross with ours, so we can draw similar analogies between the apostles and us, without confusing their ministry and ours.

What is the analogy? When we are not able to be present physically, it is legitimate to use the technology available to you to bring the message of the gospel and to encourage the church in its pilgrimage. So, when churches, for the sake of safety, are meeting in small groups in homes (as they did in the first century), and a pastor Zooms, or Skypes, or Facebook Lives into their home, while *not* ideal, it is legitimate. As Paul did, so can we. Again, Paul recognized the inadequacy of such media. But its inadequacy did not therefore make it illegitimate. It was not ideal, but not invalid.

3. Are We Acting out of Fear?

I think it depends what you mean. Was Paul acting out of fear when he climbed out a window on the city wall to avoid being martyred? Were the spies acting out of fear when they hid on Rahab's roof? Were Moses' parents acting out of fear when they hid him for three months? (Hebrews says no). Was Moses acting out of fear when he fled Pharaoh? (Exodus seems to imply yes. Hebrews says no!). All of these acted to preserve life, but they were not acting out of ungodly fear. The disciples after the death of Jesus, hiding in the upper room, on the other hand, was acting to preserve life out of faithless fear.

3. Weaker Brother

Paul discussed weaker brothers in two places in Scripture, Ro 14 and 1 Co 8. As John Murray points out, the 1 Corinthians passage is more narrow in its discussion, and the Romans passage a bit broader.¹ What we can say of the Romans' passage is that some people had religious scruples² about certain behaviors due to a weakness in their faith. The most important applications of the Romans passage are these. First, the weak and the strong are not to judge one another (Ro 14:3–4, 10). Second, each is to do what they do *to the Lord* (Ro 14:6–8). Third, the strong are not to entice the weak into going against conscience (Ro 14:13, 15, 20–23).

The tricky part of this passage is always in discerning just who are the weak and who are the strong. Remember, the weak is the one who has some extra biblical scruple based in some religious concern. Which is to say, the weak thinks something is wrong for religious reasons, even when that thing is not actually wrong. Note that “extra biblical” does not mean sinful. It just means a “scruple” or rule that is not found in Scripture and so is “outside” (extra) of the Bible.

In our current case, the weak might be the one who thinks every church *must* stop meeting for love's sake. This is the one who says, “it is *wrong* for churches to meet right now, out of love for the physically vulnerable.” They have a biblical principle, *love for the physically vulnerable*, and they are applying that religious principle and coming up with an extra-biblical scruple. Their conscience tells them, I cannot meet.

On the other hand, the weak might be the one who thinks every church *must* continue meeting in person for obedience's sake. This is the one who says, God has commanded us to meet, we

¹ See John Murray, *Westminster Theological Journal*, Vol XII.2, 1950.

² Dictionary.com defines scruples as, “a moral or ethical consideration or standard that acts as a restraining force or inhibits certain actions.”

must meet in this way (physically present, including certain elements, singing for example) every time, without exception, or we are sinning against God.

I happen to think *both* are weaker brothers. The weaker brother is the one who sees the situation in black and white and cannot appreciate the nuance of the application of biblical principles. His conscience is bound for religious reasons, though it does not need to be.

That makes this situation particularly difficult, when you have “weaker brothers” on both sides of the issue saying their conscience is bound in opposing ways. The strong, in this case, have their work cut out for them.

4. True Religion

One argument that I have heard from the side that says we *must* continue meeting, is that the principle of love is too wishy-washy and so vague that it can be used to justify anything. The problem with such a retort is that love is the purpose for which we were created. Jesus said the two great commandments are to love the Lord our God and to love our neighbor (Mt 22:36–40). Love of neighbor, Paul says, is the fulfilling of the law (Ro 13:9–10; Ga 5:14). And, while I know no argument is ever quite this simple, when religious duty and love of neighbor clash in Scripture, it is normally love of neighbor that is supposed to win out (see, for example, Pr 21:3; Mic 6:6–8; Mk 12:28–34). True religion, after all, is never described as “participating in proper services” but in loving the weak and vulnerable well (Isa 1:17; Jas 1:26–27). Of course, I don’t think we should pit the two against one another. We should pursue *both*. But sometimes the two *do* come into conflict, and Jesus says we should prioritize love of neighbor. So, in the parable of the good Samaritan, it is a priest and a levite who avoided helping the injured man, and that (likely) because it would interfere with their religious purity (Lk 10:29–37). To the contrary, Jesus teaches if you are performing your religious duties and remember that there is a relational problem in the human sphere, you are to stop your religious duties and go fix the relational problem and then come back and “offer your gift” (Mt 5:23–24). The point is, if we do not prioritize love, our religion becomes empty and hypocritical. And so, “If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person’s religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world” (Jas 1:25–27).

Conclusion

Again, I don't think there is an easy answer here. I haven't "solved the issue." If anything, thoughtful reflection makes such decisions harder. But, at least if we realize how difficult such decisions are, we will begin to show grace and have patience for those who differ.