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Ten Theses on Digitally Mediated Worship

Photo by Tye Doring

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For months, the pandemic has made gathering for worship in much of North America, as in much of the world, dangerous. In this period of dispersion, my church, like so many others, has turned to the tools of digital media for worship. Sunday mornings I find myself seated not on the familiar pew but on my couch, with a pixelated approximation of the liturgy before me.

It is a sad substitute. There are the frictions that come from transferring church from one medium to another—audio and visuals mismatched, backgrounds that distract, the flattening of liturgy's call and response—but what grates most is being reminded of in-person worship, the faces and their background, my church, so familiar and yet so alien on a screen. Yet each week I return. As the widespread adoption of digital tools attests, mediated worship, while less than ideal, is helpful in a time in which so many aspects of our lives are less than ideal.

And it's likely these tools are here to stay. As communities ease into gathering for worship again, for some churchgoers the risk will be too great. Alongside the traditional, in-person option churches will offer a "virtual" option for participating. It seems likely that when the last wave of infection has finally broken, many churches will maintain this option. It would benefit us to consider what that change will mean for worship.

A question, then: How do digital tools change worship?

What follows is an attempt at an answer. Its form is taken from Alan Jacobs, whose perceptive theses on technology inform my own. Like Jacobs's, the following statements are intended to provoke discussion. The use of tools in Christian worship is always subject to controversy; my hope is that a consideration of these relatively new tools will help to discern their place in the life of the church.

1. Christian worship is an act of attention the church makes to the Lord.

> As the eyes of servants look to the hand of their masters,
>
> and the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress,
>
> So our eyes look to the Lord our God,
>
> until he show us his mercy. (Psalm 123:2–3)

The psalmist's picture of Israel looking to the Lord is also a picture of the church at worship, in which the worshiping community fixes its attention on the Lord. The characteristic form of this attention is Holy Communion, celebrated by the people of God gathered each Sunday. The Eucharist is the paradigmatic instance of Jacobs's thesis that "we are fed by what we attend to." In attending to the Lord, the church is fed. The same pattern applies to other forms of Christian worship, from praise services to baptisms to private prayers. In each, Christians attend to and are fed by the Lord. Any act of attention by more than one person involves organizing time and space, and though its details vary by community, this is liturgy's function. Unlike other objects of attention, however, God is not (in Stanley Hauerwas's phrase) part of the metaphysical furniture of the universe. In its worship the church has often found certain objects helpful for directing its attention beyond the world of things. The use of a scroll in early churches, stained glass in medieval cathedrals, and a sound system in a modern parish serve (or fail to serve) this purpose. The question to ask of any tool, then, is: In what way can it be used to help the community attend to the Lord?

2. Digital media are constructed to divide and direct the attention of users for the profit of owners.

Perhaps because I am a child of the internet age, the architecture of the world I grew up around online often seems immoveable. But the landscape of digital media is neither objective nor timeless. It has a reason for being, and it isn't enjoyment, mine or anyone else's. It's profit.

I am not alone in forgetting this. It took James Williams—one among a now crowded field of tech prodigies turned professional skeptics—some time to realize precisely what he was doing at Google. Williams writes that he came "to understand that the cause to which I had been conscripted was not the organization of information, but of attention. The digital technology industry was not launching and iterating neutral tools, but directing flesh-and-blood human lives." The default settings of online platforms demonstrate Williams's point: fail to change them and you'll be bombarded by notifications, advertisements, and suggestions that divvy up and distribute your attention in ways that maximize the platform's profit. Our attention is their business, and the vast amount of information companies gather ensures that business is good. Thus the characteristic usefulness of digital media is surveillance, while their characteristic use is entertainment.

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3. To use digital tools for worship requires using them against their default settings.

What is it we're doing when church is online? The verbs we use to talk about worship betray our confusion. Watching, viewing, streaming—each word assumes the activity is on the screen. The person before it is passive. It's true that before screens we revert to roles to which we're accustomed. We become voyeurs, critics, consumers. But worship is not entertainment; it requires an act of attention. And as Simone Weil writes in *Waiting for God*, "There is something in our soul that loathes true attention much more violently than flesh loathes fatigue." Weil's formulation may be extreme, but it points us in the right direction. We ought to be wary of the seamlessness of the digital realm. For worship to be possible, some of the settings will need to change. How our bodies interact with computers may need tweaking—attending to God may be easier when the

mouse isn't within reach, for instance—and digital technologies may need to be supplemented by other, older tools—a codex Bible or candles or icons in conjunction with the screen.

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4. Video recording opens the life of the church to surveillance.

Surveillance may be a remote concern to pastors trying, in a difficult time, to minister to their congregations using the tools available to them. But if video recording continues to have a place in churches after the pandemic has passed, the scope of that change ought to be considered in the context of what Shoshana Zuboff calls "surveillance capitalism." The tech giants don't discriminate—for them church is just another source of data, one more way to understand, predict, and drive behavior in profitable directions. Churches, like other institutions, ought to be wary of being used in the ways Zuboff has shown corporations are now using data. Nor is surveillance by companies the only concern. Preachers who know that every word said in the pulpit is subject to online exploitation for as long as digital archives endure will preach differently than ones who know their sermons are addressed to a particular community at a particular time. In certain countries, of course, surveillance of Christians by the state is routine; digital recording in those contexts carries particular dangers.

Consider by contrast the example of the early church, which dismissed those preparing for baptism before the celebration of the holy mysteries. Not only the consumption of the *mysterion*, the sacrament, but the *knowledge* of those mysteries was reserved for those whose lives had been definitively joined to the life of the Christian community. Their practice is a reminder that the church does well to guard against kinds of looking opposed to true attention. When, after receiving the consecrated bread and wine, I thank God with the rest of my church "for assuring us in these holy mysteries that we are living members of the Body of your Son," our intimacy with Christ is affirmed. It is worth considering the place tools that can be used for surveillance have in that union.

5. These three abide: the recorded, the livestreamed, and the video call. But the greatest of these is the video call.

If the default use of digital media is entertainment, then a video call is the furthest from this default. Video calls aren't ideal—they can be uniquely fatiguing, for reasons Michael Sacasas has illuminated—but unlike recorded or streamed services, video calls make participation normal. The best calls preserve the back-and-forth between leader(s) and congregation. And communal participation, awkward as it may be, guards against seeing the screen as the object of attention. Worship mediated by recording, on the other hand, asks the least of worshipers—the congregation is superfluous—and is the most vulnerable to surveillance.

6. Recordings of worship make gathering for worship possible—but only in an impaired sense.

"The liturgy requires focal points in space and time which are constant and stable, and which have about them a certain sober splendor." So writes Aiden Kavanaugh in his classic liturgical handbook *The Elements of Rite*. The difficulty of worshiping with digital media is that focal points in space and time are pinned against the timeless, placeless backdrop of the internet. Video worship, whether synchronous or recorded and thus asynchronous, does make a kind of gathering possible, but to do so it must rely on points outside the digital frame. Some ministers anchor services by filming in the traditional space of worship. The church as a background focuses participants' attention (and generally has more "sober splendor" than the pastor's living room). The interior of the church links prior services, ones to come, and the one occurring (or recently occurred), just as the familiar words of the prayers do. The oddity of streaming a service recorded earlier in the week is potentially an occasion to consider the unity of the church across space and time—we do, after all, confess faith in "the communion of the saints"—but the experience of recorded worship usually feels more alienating than uniting, a reminder that we are present to one another only in an impaired sense.

7. Screens reorganize the worshiping community.

A computer divides the worshiping body into those on and in front of a screen. The former's access to the space of the church and, in some cases, to the Sacrament makes

this division painful. Surely some of the energy animating arguments about whether it is proper to have, in one sense or another, a "virtual" eucharistic service comes from this pain. But activity, not access, is what really distinguishes the groups. The worshiping community is divided between watchers and watched, the essential and inessential workers of the "work of the people." The screen reorganizes in another way too: the links between worshipers are severed. Sharing a hymnal or exchanging a knowing look with another congregant aren't possible online. Worshipers' interactions are mediated by comment boxes or moderated by video-call hosts. What Robert Jenson, writing about televised worship, calls "crosstalk" is eliminated. The result is an organization that looks less like the organism described by St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 12, a human body, but (in Jenson's words) "a collection of persons who have a common focus, who are located at points along the radii of a circle."

8. Mirrors make us self-conscious—so too the screen.

Looking through a window at an object, our attention tends to rebound backward. The separation we sense makes us conscious of ourselves. All the more if, in the window's glare, we catch a glimpse of ourselves. We cannot help being distracted by our own image. A screen has the same effect, since it often performs the same functions. On a video call, I become uneasy seeing my video feed among the others on the call. Attention to God at any time is difficult, but it is harder still when our unkempt selves stare back at us from our screens.

9. Worship with a screen bores because it asks so little of us.

Invariably about halfway through a Sunday service online I begin to fidget. At home the familiar motions of church—singing, bowing, moving forward to receive Communion—are either inapplicable or awkward. There is simply too little asked of the body, ordinarily the instrument of attention. Church services vary in their sensory composition, but the screen flattens them all. Touch, taste, and smell are eliminated. We are not usually asked to stand or to kneel. The eye, usually subordinate to the ears and to the activity of the body, takes precedence. The passivity of the experience makes for boredom.

10. Dissatisfaction with online worship is a feature, not a bug.

Video feeds freeze and blur. Audio cuts out. The eye wanders to the number of viewers on the top of the screen. Many are the dissatisfactions of worship online.

The great sorrow of human life is that to look and to eat are two different operations.

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But if dissatisfaction is often a distraction from worship, it is also potentially a tool. Our disappointment with worship's digital mediation can remind us of the tragedy that's caused our dispersal and can prod us to turn to God. The present's substitute for gathering for worship can direct our eyes to the day we will return. Weil writes that "the great sorrow of human life is that to look and to eat are two different operations. Only on the other side of heaven, where God lives, are they one and the same operation." Online worship is a reminder of this sorrow, since in it the distance between looking and eating is felt so acutely. But our longing for a world in which things are otherwise can point us to the world in which they are. Being reminded of the future in which we will share Eucharist again—truly eating, truly together—can remind us too of the world of which that meal is a sign. Together our eyes can look to that time and place where the whole church will be gathered to gaze and to feast, at once and for eternity, on the Lord.

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