

From one degree of imperfection to another

A consideration of
gathering in
different ways

This conversation between Baptist ministers Ruth Gouldbourne and Steve Holmes focuses on issues raised following the pandemic, particularly the theological as well as practical questions around gathering for worship when we could not be together in our buildings

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Ruth Gouldbourne: Traditional Baptist ecclesiology makes a big thing of the 'coming together' of people to worship, focusing on the promise 'where two or three are gathered in my name, I am in the midst' as the basis for calling any community a church community. So it seems to me that the central issue is around 'gathering', and what constitutes that. What did 'gathering' mean when we were all online, and what does it mean now that we are exploring hybrid formats for our worship services?

Steve Holmes: I suppose I really want to distinguish between the 'ideal' and the 'adequate' or 'acceptable'. Yes, our ideal ecclesiology is that the church – those who gather together around Christ – is in one place at one time, but in fact, we've all got members who are housebound, folk in hospital, folk who are away at any given time. We could also go back to the experience of persecution which early Baptists experienced in the 17th century, often enough with the pastor in prison, but that did not stop their being church. And of course persecution is still a reality for many Baptists around the world. So there is some sense of 'gathering' – maybe in intent or by desire or something like that, which has to be an adequate way of being church.

Then we go into lockdown, and we say 'this is very, very different', and all of a sudden we've discovered technological solutions. The question is, for me: is coming together on screen, or with some of us in the room and some of us on screen – an 'adequate' gathering? And if so, or if not, where is the line that divides the adequate from the inadequate?

RG: I was really struck on our first Sunday on Zoom when most people had no idea of how this was going to work. But once we got onto that first virtual meeting, people were moved almost to tears at seeing one another, and they still talk about that moment of seeing faces and being able to say hello. There was definitely a sense of meeting that I think was unexpected – and was really important.

SH: Our church had a preaching series on 1 Thessalonians during the pandemic, and I was following the reading in Greek, and the word *prosopon* was there twice. In the translation we use – the 2011 NIV – it was translated in two different ways. One was 'I want to see you face to face' and the other was something about being present with you bodily. Obviously for Paul, those two are inseparable, and it seems to me that our experience in lockdown was that we could see each other face to face generally, but we couldn't be together.

Now, the word *prosopon* has a very elastic meaning. At one level it is about facial appearance, and so seeing the face is adequate to it, and at another level, it is something about the person in the most ontological sense as indicated by an encouragement to 'greet one another with a holy kiss' at the end of 1 Thessalonians. That said, it is a letter; it is Paul using the technology of the day, when he can't physically be with the believers in Thessalonica.

RG: I found that during the lockdowns, I preached more on the epistles than I normally do, precisely because Paul was – sometimes explicitly – wrestling with being both present, through the letter, and not being present bodily, and that was our experience. The sense of presence grew as we got more accustomed to it, such that when we moved back into the building it felt odd. That was partly to do with having got used to seeing people's faces on screen, whilst in the building we are still masked, and suddenly the faces weren't there.

SH: I remember fairly soon after we'd been allowed back into the church building, it was a Communion service. I was at the front, and there was this moment when everyone took their masks off to eat, and I suddenly saw all their faces – and I found that really quite moving.



RG: People's first encounter with our congregational life is not simply face to face and we take that for granted. Our noticeboards, our social media, all of that passes on information about who and what we are so that

people have already 'met' the church even without meeting individuals. So meeting face to face is not all there is, and never has been.

SH: Perhaps we need to think of gathering for a worship service as an anticipated eschatological reality. In Revelation 7:9 there is the '*great multitude [...] from every tongue, tribe and nation*', which I want to read as the universal church which, come the resurrection, will be gathered around Jesus. Every experience of, or every bit of gathering we do, is an anticipation of that.

And so, on that account, all our gathering is imperfect, impartial and anticipatory. The fact that at a given moment, we gather electronically is clearly an issue that needs a response, but it's not a falling away from perfection to something worse; it's a falling away from what is already imperfect.

RG: From one degree of imperfection to another! I'm also struck by how often in the resurrection stories Jesus is not 'there'. On the road to Emmaus, he is there and then suddenly he is not; he says to Mary, "tell the disciples to go to Galilee" and "don't hold on to me". In our gathering Jesus promises to be in our midst, but part of Jesus' presence is being further ahead.

SH: And points us again to the eschaton.

RG: This is really helpful. It is not falling from something perfect to imperfect, but rather that we are always anticipating what you have referred to as the eschatological gathering. So while we can't be unthinking about doing it differently, our reflection on the changes and questions they raise do not need to assume that this is inevitably disastrous.

SH: Yes, and the issue of implicit theologies is important here. There is a sense in which the right way to do it as Baptists is to do it and then think about it. It is the whole basis of contextual theology; it is reflecting on praxis that leads to understanding.



RG: We have a baptismal service coming up in a few weeks, and though most people will be in the building, we have one or two who can only join by Zoom. And I find I am struggling, even in talking about it now, with the language. People joining by Zoom would be present; they would really be there – they would do the readings and lead the prayers – but their presence is of a different kind.

SH: This is where the elasticity of the word *prosopon* we talked about before is helpful – even when we are not in the same room, we can be 'face to face' in a way that is real. Everything that happens on Zoom is about presence in some sort of space.

RG: So the language of how we describe what we are doing has to be renewed.

SH: Indeed – we can't talk about 'watching' the service – though it might be in a screen, you're not merely 'watching', but participating. And again, it is about very deliberately welcoming those who are joining in all the different places – in the sanctuary, in the overflow, as well as those who are joining online. It's about trying to find ways of saying 'we are all together'.

I come back to the intention and the provisionality of everything we do, and the confident belief that the Spirit makes up for our deficiencies. So, if someone is watching on Facebook because they don't want to be seen for

no good reason, then I think we have a problem with that. If using the anonymity of watching asynchronously for a reason – someone with no experience of church, wanting to get some idea of what it is like, then that’s one thing – we know of people who have found us online that way.

But if church members tried to remain at some distance from the rest of the church, that’s difficult. On the other hand, if someone is in a nursing home, and timing can only work outside of service time, so the only way to engage is through the recording, then they are gathering the best way they can. That should not be sneered at or dismissed. I can understand somebody drawing the line there, but I don’t necessarily want to. I do think that intentionality and possibility matter.

We should always be striving to do church as well as we can. And if we know we have stopped short of that, then we have got a problem, but that will look different in different contexts.



RG: There is something about God’s eternal *now*. If we’re talking about the communion of saints – an unusual concept for Baptists, I recognise – community with those whose temporal experience is quite different from ours, whatever that means; those who are not living in the same time, then we can say we are still in community.

SH: And that is right. One of our older members, our church secretary, regularly speaks of those ‘who have gone before us in the church’ – in the sense of those who have gone before who are still part of this community, and our story is their story, and we can’t unpick that.

RG: In one of your blogs, you commented that whilst worshipping online was new, some have been teaching online for a while, and were finding some unexpected benefits in that. You wondered whether that would also happen for those of us worshipping online. Might it have something to do with the communion of saints? Might it become something we find a language for as we have begun to explore new ways of relating?

SH: Maybe. For us the unexpected positives include the fact that at least one person found us online, and has come through to faith and baptism. One of my ways of reading that is that the kind of barrier of watching a service online is far lower than the barrier of stepping into a church building.

And again, folk who were unable to join physically can be with us online. We made connection with an American serviceman who couldn’t get to any church, but found us online and starting worshipping with us; we’ve made contact with a woman in Australia who joined us when they were locked down. It seems to me that we need a space which allows for those who are there precisely because they don’t yet want to be part of a community, but still to have a place to worship.

RG: A former colleague preached on the woman who touched the hem of Jesus’ robe and reminded the congregation that not everyone needs or wants an effusive welcome.

SH: Yes absolutely. I remember getting a phone call from a former student years back. He had been running outreach groups in local cafés and had discovered some folk wanted

to stay in the cafés and own that meeting as their worshipping community. We talked about preaching of the Word and celebration of the sacraments and decided that, yes, why shouldn’t those café meetings be churches? What was intended to be a liminal space in fact became a new form of ecclesial community.

RG: This reminds me of Ali Boulton’s paper ‘Church Down Ali’s’ at Theology Live 2022 (bit.ly/churchatalis) – at what point does something become what we can coherently call ‘a’ church? The question that meeting regularly for a spa evening and discussing issues of faith left me with was about continuity. Clearly there were ecclesiological elements in the event – there was a gathering, there was mutual openness and trust, there was a naming of Divine presence. But there was no ongoing structure, no mutual commitment to ‘walking together’ in the old Baptist phrase, no expectation of continuity. So, could this gathering be called ‘a church’ or ‘a congregation’?

SH: It reminds me of that liberation theology phrase, ‘ecclesial communities’. When the church in Latin America was under persecution in the late 20th century there was a significant shortage of priests, and so communities were simply meeting and reading Scripture together. There was the recognition of ‘our’ story in the Bible story, and there was a real sense of there being something church-like happening here.

RG: I wonder if that illuminates the issue of recorded services. There is something church-like happening in that moment, but because it rules out mutual relationship, it can't have the continuity of church.

SH: I have been saying for years that it's easy to do online meetings with people you've met once, but hard if you've never met them at all, and I wonder whether, if all we can do is record, then great, that's what we do. But, barring a particular work of the Spirit, recording is something adequate to maintain the community that exists, but probably not something that is going to provide an easy way for people to become part of a new community.

RG: It is very hard to start a relationship online. The term 'somatic' is so helpful, because relationship is not just face-to-face, as in being able to see – it is about the non-verbal communication, which is so exhausting online, and where somebody is completely unknown, it is very tough. It's as simple as eye-contact, which you can't do online.

SH: Perhaps we need to learn some of the ways of creating relationship online. We are created to be bodies; our ideal relationships are embodied relationships. That's what it is to be human. It's back to what we were talking about earlier, of doing the best we can in given circumstances, knowing that nothing we do achieves eschatological perfection, when 'we will know fully, as we are fully known' (1 Cor 13:12).



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PRAYERS

Heaven Touching Earth The online update

I'd downloaded the program, assuming that once installed it would function for years, faithfully performing the job it was meant to do; but I was wrong, for it needed constant updates, a regular online search for the latest modifications if its usefulness was not to be compromised.

Lord, remind me of the need to connect with you, if my faith is to stay fresh and meaningful, able to meet the challenge of changing times.

Remind me that it is not simply about a one-off commitment but about an ongoing relationship, the health of which depends on making time to hear your voice and discern your will.

Install, then, your word on my tongue,
your love in my heart,
and your joy in my soul,
this and every day.

Amen.

By Nick Fawcett