

The Post-Pandemic Pew

A Reflection for Pastors

Joel Biermann

The daily tallies have become part of the routine of life: new cases, hospitalizations, positivity rates, deaths. Besides the biological metrics, we are also bombarded with interminable, anxious reporting about all the other life-altering impacts of the coronavirus that invaded our lives in early 2020. Financial, social, educational, emotional, familial, occupational, marital, physical—every conceivable aspect is highlighted, evaluated, analyzed, and lamented or, on occasion, actually affirmed. In the brooding overcast of the past year, some have managed to detect a silver lining here or there: increased family time, less hectic schedules, home projects getting done, and lawns receiving extra attention. Some optimists even claim to have sighted silver linings for the church. Yes, the pandemic's sudden panic devastated Lent and Holy Week this past spring, but the unwelcome lockdowns and restrictions, it is argued, also fostered experimentation and implementation of new technologies that often previously had been resisted. Ready or not, the church was catapulted into the on-line world. It is suggested that all the new ways of "connecting" through social media about which we hear incessantly are a boon for the church that can now foster community even from a safe distance.

Time and reflection will, of course, provide the final verdict on the existence of any silver linings for the church; indeed, with enough imagination and resolve almost any negative can be recast to shimmer at least a little on the edges. With due respect to the gifts of the optimists in our midst, and fully aware of Christ's enduring and solicitous lordship over his bride the church, I believe, nevertheless, that the church will be better served in both the short and the long term, when her leaders come to terms with the true impact of this pandemic on the church. This impact is, I am convinced, far more profound, challenging, and damaging than it seems on the surface. In fact, any notion of a pandemic benefit to the church is, I believe, merely wishful and even reckless thinking. The reality is quite the opposite. Indeed, one does not need daily updates on whatever metrics best reveal the church's health to recognize that the pandemic's mark on the church has been anything but positive. We should not expect this to change.

This should come as no surprise. How can it be a good thing with a good outcome, for the church not to do the one thing most essential to her existence: come together as the unified body of Christ to receive and celebrate the gifts of Christ? Through my teaching and writing over the years I have sought with some deliberation to highlight the importance of habituation—the cultivation of Christian habits and practices that shape and reinforce the Christian faith and life. Considered from that perspective (one which I can no longer escape!), there is much more about the pandemic's impact on the church that deserves careful thought than merely debates over obedience to authority, constitutionally granted liberties, care for the neighbor, and public safety. The very nature of what it means to be church needs to be taken into account.

Everyone knows that there is no substitute for the community gathered in person to sing a common song, listen as one to the word proclaimed, confess with a single voice, pray with hearts joined in one prayer, and partake of one cup and one loaf. But, of course, when, by scientific pronouncement and government fiat, such things became impossible, we all did what we could. What choice did we have? I did it, too. For eight weeks—eight wonderful weeks in the heart of the church’s most glorious time of the year/eight miserable weeks of enforced separation—I preached to empty pews and then checked the number of YouTube views for that week’s edition of another recorded quasi-service. It was the reality of the circumstances and it was my responsibility to figure out how best to care for the congregation that had enlisted my help to fill the pastoral void during their vacancy. No doubt, there was something adventurous and engaging about planning and crafting each’s week recording; and I embraced the challenge with as much creativity as technology and time would allow. Yet, all along, I knew that there was something deficient and, I suspected, even damaging about the entire endeavor. Living and reflecting since then, through what have become achingly long months of pandemic-life, I am increasingly convinced of the fundamental damage that was and is being done to the church by the extraordinary quashing of ordinary church activity.

Depending on the vagaries of virus statistics and governmental reactions, most churches, of course, have found a way to reopen their doors and welcome people back into their sanctuaries. Some endured much more than eight weeks of misery, others less, but none escaped unscathed. Even congregations that have crafted a way to gather are almost certainly doing it in ways that severely curtail if not completely cut the flow of fellowship and the bonds of unity. Masks and shields and gloves and sanitizer, pews x-ed out with tape, 6’ of distance marked everywhere, abbreviated services, useless pew racks bereft of hymnals and Bibles, muffled or sotto voce or no singing at all, hasty departures, guarded conversations, and masked unsmiling waves from afar—this is the warm, welcoming, and encouraging experience of those who do gather for worship. Of course, there are other once-faithful church members motivated by fear, or “an abundance of caution,” or the desire to placate overanxious family members, who have yet to find their way back into the sanctuary at all. Beyond the weekend, the church’s humming routine of activity and productive busyness has been choked; facilities are all but abandoned, and calendars empty. For believers, the routine experience of church life has been shattered and the consequences are even more sweeping and far-reaching than those that are readily seen and acknowledged.

Humans are creatures of habit, of course. Greater than a passing observation about our instinctive proclivities, the human need for and love of habits is a profound force that powerfully shapes not only how we behave but also how we believe. It is true: *lex orandi lex credendi*. The way that a person worships will shape what that person believes. And the person who does not worship? Well, the axiom still applies. No worship...no faith. Sooner or later, but inevitably, the reality takes hold. And what of all the other routines of life that ordinarily filled our calendars and formed our days before the world recoiled in fear at the threat of a new way to die?

Smothered worship and hollowed out church calendars have left lifelong believers floundering in uncharted waters. Sunday morning comes and there is nowhere to go. So, the morning is spent in pajamas with a new block of free time to be filled. Perhaps the church's weekly webcast or live-stream is watched, or maybe there's a more enticing church with a slicker program to watch, or better yet, maybe on-line church can just be "gotten around to" later, no need to disrupt a leisurely morning. Without intentionally choosing it and against all that they would have ever thought possible, staunch and faithful believers have discovered what their heathen neighbors have known all along: it's kind of nice to have Sunday morning free. It was so strange and "all wrong" the first time, but now it's become a routine, one that stretches through the whole week: no choir rehearsal, no small group meeting to plan, no midweek worship, no Bible study to attend, no sausage supper planning meeting, no youth group, no potluck to fortify, no catechism class, nothing. Initially, it was a dreadful loss, but as the weeks and months have elapsed it's become, by default, a familiar habit. If it takes 30 days to establish a habit—God's faithful have now had more than 30 weeks to acquire new habits that demand scant time or effort for things related to church.

The result, though, has not been particularly alarming. Yes, there are a few of the once-faithful who have proactively exploited their forced vacation from church, actually reflected on their beliefs and priorities, concluded that they belong elsewhere, and have left the church for good. The vast majority of the once-faithful, however, have not engaged in such bold theatrics. Without the church as a fixed and active force in their lives they have simply adjusted their routines and rebuilt their schedules even more firmly on other truths and other priorities, convinced all the while that still they believe what they've always believed and nothing's changed. To a point, they're right. The sky is not falling. They have not renounced Christ. They still pray before meals and read their Bibles, perhaps even religiously. Their children have not rebelled against their parents or slipped off into apostasy. God is still there when needed, and God is still blessing with or without the church...a remarkable, astounding revelation, for the once-faithful—even if most haven't yet fully realized it. It turns out that in the new normal, life is fine. In fact, life is good. The once-faithful who would never have left the church and who could never have imagined life apart from the church have had the church taken from them, and have discovered a life without the church that seems to be working just fine. They did not willingly choose this. It was chosen for them. While we were all busily doing what we could to navigate the now cliché "challenging times", the church has profoundly changed.

Pastors and other congregational leaders can plan and write and record with great ingenuity, talent, and enthusiasm, pleading with their people not to grow complacent and not to neglect God's prominent place in their lives, but reality and the laws of habituation are not overcome with zeal and conviction and technology. When the church no longer serves as the foundation and the shape of a believer's weekly routine, when Sunday morning spent at church is no longer the keystone of a week that orbits around the life of the church, the remaining void must and will be filled with something else. Projects at home, a fresh Sunday morning hobby, newly discovered on-line friends and influences, a newborn or more fully pursued passion for a pressing social

injustice, a preoccupation with politics: life will be occupied with ideas and diversions and causes to give it meaning. The place once securely occupied by the church has been filled with other attractions. It happens. It has happened. It is happening. Satan does not squander an opportunity as remarkable and unexpected as a world completely undone by a virus. Seizing his advantage, he is waging war with the dependable and deadly weapons of apathy, distraction, comfort, and attrition—their reliable potency now amplified countless times over by the destruction of holy habits and the devastation of pious life routines. With the help of so many willing and unwitting soldiers, Satan is winning battles in the lives of saints that would have seemed impossible only months ago.

As I write, the world wrings its hands and frets as the daily tallies set new record highs in categories and metrics less than a year old. And all the while, a much older metric that gauges not life, but eternity, is given scant attention: the measure of the evaporating faith of the faithful who have learned to live life without the church. It appears likely that God may soon grant a conclusion to the intolerable impositions of this past year and bring an end to this pandemic. And while the world will then try to figure out yet another new normal, the once-faithful members of Christ's church will be faced with figuring out what they are going to do with their Sundays and the rest of the calendar that guides their lives. What will their newest, new normal be? What habits will shape them? This pandemic, or more accurately, the world's panicked response to this pandemic has accelerated the pace and magnified the force of our society's well documented flight from the church. The once-faithful who have been marking their days in an extended church quarantine cannot escape these effects. In spite of all convictions and resolutions to the contrary, the stubborn truths of habituation and its power in the lives of people leave little doubt about what to expect.

It's time now to seek God's mercy for his church and her members. And it's time now, even before the pandemic is declared defeated, to think hard and to gain some eternal perspective on this pandemic and the hyperventilated response of the world over this past year. The point of this long reflection is perhaps less than apparent, and the patient reader deserves more than hints or suggestions. More than simply a lament, or a complaint, I hope both to sound an alarm and make an appeal. The warning is the need soberly to face and admit the significant impact that people's changed church habits must have on the faith they confess. While we can find comfort in God's promise to care for the church even in crisis, we should not ever become comfortable or even content with the sort of thin interactions, depleted calendars, and constrained worship that has normed our lives over the last months. Perhaps the notion that "the church can still be the church even when we can't be together" has merit in the teeth of a legitimate crisis (a flood or a fire) and for a few week's duration; but it cannot ever become a normal way of thinking or behaving, which is, I believe, precisely what we have allowed to happen. We need to be together in the flesh, and separation for any reason should provoke a restlessness and yearning that will not be satisfied until we gather again in person. Despite our sincerest aspirations, love of technology, or yearning for the avant-garde, the virtual church is a patent oxymoron. To pursue this course for the church is complicity with the designs of the enemy.

Though it should be apparent, the appeal of this now lengthy essay also warrants explicit articulation. It is simple and earnest: do not sacrifice the essence of the church, God's people gathered around God's gifts, for anything. One of the great marvels of the past year has been the unflagging alacrity with which the church has taken up the agenda of the world and its relentless pursuit of safety. The mantra is incessant and treated as axiomatically self-evident: "your safety is our number one priority." In a world living bereft of any eschatological hope, it actually makes sense to sanctify and venerate safety. If this existence is all there is to being human, then the extension and amplification of this immediate, physical life is clearly the highest imaginable priority, and any threat to a long and meaningful life—especially one that is novel or seemingly beyond our immediate control is the greatest possible evil. Seen in this light, the world's response to the pandemic is defensible and perhaps even reasonable: personal safety is clearly the greatest good and worth every sacrifice. In the church, however, this notion must be recognized for the falsehood that it is. Yes, physical life certainly matters, and we recognize that God uses many First Article gifts to care for our material welfare. But the church must not be lured into the trap of pursuing and honoring what is penultimate as if it was the final goal. Rather than succumb to the world's default position acting always "out of an abundance of caution," perhaps we can champion the wisdom and benefit of acting out of reasonable caution and on occasion maybe even moderate caution. The goal of our lives is not to live as long and as happily as possible. Safety is not the ideal we pursue. Safety is not the highest priority for Christians. Safety is not the lord of the church or our lives. Safety is an idol. Jesus is Lord — and Christians must live all of their lives accordingly.

The church must be the church. We must gather to worship. We must find ways faithfully to celebrate together God's gifts to us in Word and Sacrament as our Lord intended. We must provide the structure to guide Christian living not only on Sunday morning, but throughout the week. We must create and schedule and keep the events and opportunities that will help to reestablish the pious habits of God's people. We have been away from one another far too long. The church must act like the church: the gathered saints of God celebrating the gifts of God, living out the story of God in all of life, and actively encouraging one another along God's way. Certainly, such faithful living includes caring for the vulnerable and providing support, encouragement, and so, witness of Christ's reality to the wider world around us using whatever means God has provided. This is why we heed the regulations and guidelines established by those charged with protecting the public. Such obedience is an aspect of faithfully following Christ...and is measured always against the will and word of Christ. The church's pastors must strengthen, support, exhort, and yes admonish God's people to act like God's people choosing deliberately and resolutely to establish the habits that ground and guide a living faith, with corporate worship at the core. Watching a church video, reading the Bible, and praying every day are poor substitutes for the foundational habit of gathering weekly for worship. We must gather to worship together...even in the face of fear and threat.

From the holy habit of worship spring all the other supporting habits that shape a follower of Christ. Yes, there will always be some faithful saints who for any number of possible reasons simply can't join the gathering; and as always, they will be served God's gifts from the hands of their pastor, and the community will find ways to surround and care for them even in their enforced distance. But the rest of God's people—those who make up the vast majority, those who are not kept from gathering—cannot shelter and hide and wait any longer. They need to be back where they belong, back in their habit, back in their pew, back in their place in the gathered people of God.