

Being the church in a digital age

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Preacher: Dave Bott

[0 : 01] We're reading the first 16 verses of chapter 4 of Ephesians, written by Paul who describes himself as an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God and he describes the Ephesians as the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus.

So chapter 4, 1-16. I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all, all, and through all, and in all.

But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it says, when he ascended on high, he led a host of captives and he gave gifts to men.

In saying he ascended, what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.

[1 : 34] And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.

Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped.

When each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. May the Lord bless his word to our hearts and minds.

Hello, my name's Dave. I'm one of the pastors here. If you're visiting me today, a warm welcome to you. Before we get underway, I've got to admit my disorganisation.

If you're following the outline, I've changed it. Okay, so hopefully it doesn't confuse you. Just one little change. Halfway down the page, it's got four application questions.

[3 : 06] I'm going to be putting that at the start, where it should have been from the beginning, but just so you don't get lost and I lose you at the very beginning of the sermon. All right, why don't we pray as we come to God's word.

Lord, we know that you love your church, not because inherently we are lovely, but because you are a loving God and you have loved us.

And you, by your son, created the church. And by your spirit, you are renewing us. And you have promised to complete what you have begun.

So, Lord, help us see the church, see who we are, see your agenda for us through your eyes, so that we might live in a way that honours you.

So I pray that your word would speak to us this morning. In Jesus' name, amen. Amen. Well, I want to start with a quote by a guy called Tristan Harris.

[4 : 16] He worked at Google and he's behind a Netflix kind of docudrama thing about social media.

It's called The Social Dilemma. I don't know if you've seen it. If you haven't seen it, I'd highly recommend it because I'm not going to be able to explain it fully up here. But now this docudrama, it's been translated into over 190 languages.

A hundred million people seem to have watched it, I think. So it's got some, it's worth listening to. Here's the quote. We are now years into a mass societal warping process that has made us into a different kind of species, frankly.

A species that is addicted, distracted, polarised, narcissistic, misinformed.

The list keeps going. Anxious, depressed, unsure of what's true, apathetic. Well, okay.

[5 : 36] If even half of that quote is true, we need to have a look at how the digital world is affecting us as a church family and how we live to honour the Lord.

So today we look at the topic of being the church in a digital age. And this is the start of four weeks on four topics that have the potential to undermine us being the church.

We'll either succumb to our culture or these four topics, if we see the church through God's eyes and live as he calls us to, these four topics also give us an opportunity to show the world a better way, an alternative, the good life in belonging to God's people.

With any truth, knowing the theory is essential. It's essential to have good doctrine. And we've had five weeks now of looking at the truth in God's word. But we don't glorify God by being able to frequently and passionately just say truth.

That's not how we glorify God. We glorify God, obviously we need to say truth, but we glorify God when that truth groups our hearts and changes the way we live. I can say I believe in God's sovereignty, for instance, until the cows come home.

[7 : 00] And I do and I hope I do for the rest of my life. But do I accept every circumstance as coming from the sovereign hand of God or do I rally against it?

Do I pray as my first instinct because I know he is sovereign? Do you get what I mean? Knowing the truth and it gripping you to the point of change, that's what matters.

And that's why we've picked these four topics, because as elders we think this could really either undermine or make the church flourish depending on how we approach these topics.

So today, I've already introduced it, is about being the church in the digital age. And the next three is going to be being the church in an individualistic culture. And the third one is being the church in a hostile society.

And then we'll finish off with being the church in light of our eternal hope. So that's where we're heading. So before we get into this, or it's not before, an important first step of getting into this topic is to refresh ourselves in knowing what the church is and what we are called to be through God's eyes.

[8 : 21] That the church is to be a foretaste of heaven. So through God's eyes, we see that the church is central to his eternal plans.

We see in Genesis 2, albeit a community of two people, but gathered perfectly in worship, enjoying God's presence, until sin disrupts that, breaks that unity, creating hostility between man and God, and God to man, and hostility between people.

And the judgment is being scattered. The essence of the word church is gathering. God wants a gathered people to himself. In Exodus 19, we see Israel gathered at the mountain under the law, but that gathering fails again because of sin.

It was only a picture of the true gathering that would come through Jesus. What does Jesus say in Matthew 16? As soon as they say, you are the Christ, the first expression of faith, he says, I'm going to build my church.

That's why I've come. That's why I'm going to die and rise, to build my church. And what do we see at the end of scripture? The church, the bride, the new Jerusalem glorified.

[9 : 47] The dwelling place with God and man. It's central. Church is absolutely central to God's eternal plans. Through God's eyes, we understand this gathering is a spiritual reality.

The sin of living for self that has made us hostile to God and has caused so much dysfunction between people has been conquered. We see in Hebrews 12 that this new gathering in Christ is victorious over sin.

It's victorious over death. It's marked by peace and unity and joy. As we heard read in Ephesians 4, it is so united with one body, one spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.

We are gathered into Christ. We're not isolated Christians. To be saved is to be gathered. And this gathering is permanent.

This spiritual gathering is permanent. We saw that in Hebrews 12, that when God judges and shakes everything, heaven and earth, the final judgment, what is left standing? Nothing but the church.

[11 : 19] It is permanent. That's where you find security in life. But how is this gathering to be expressed now? Well, through God's eyes, we see that this spiritual heavenly gathering is not expressed in some vague notion of being the universal church because, remember, church is about gathering.

It's in local church families like this one. It's a functioning body showing the unity, the peace that has been created.

I don't know who I'm quoting here. Emma reminded me of this quote. It's some Bible teacher, but I can't remember. Can you be a Christian and not value and be committed to a local church?

Don't be a silly sausage. I don't know. Anyway, if that helps you, maybe. There's nothing in the Bible about that. To be gathered is to be in the local church.

That's how you express it. Know who you are. I'm going to say in a way that doesn't make sense and technically isn't correct, I am the church.

[12 : 31] I know that doesn't make sense. It's not correct. We are the church. But you're not just part of the church. It's the fundamental thing about who you are. We are the people of God.

It's not just you attend church. You are the church. We are the church. We express that locally. Being gathered.

Not choosing who you relate to, but it's a community created by grace. Across ages, across personalities, across cultures. It's everyone who's been saved and under the lordship of Jesus.

That's what the local church is to express. And through God's eyes, we see our agenda, what we're called to do as the church.

And it's not primarily about social welfare, though individual Christians might do all these things. It's not about being a moral watchdog to try and make Australia Christian.

[13 : 38] It's not about living separate from society and just condemning society. It's not even to be a functioning machine to do as much evangelism as we can.

Our agenda in Scripture is to be. Be the church. Love one another. That's how you'll show that you are my disciples.

Ephesians 3, 9 to 11 is a key passage. It's through the church that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rules and authorities in the heavenly places.

God is glorified in his unified church. It's as we focus on being the church, that's when we'll be a winsome invitation to the world. Look what life is like being gathered to Jesus.

And through God's eyes, we see that the structure of a healthy, functioning body of a local church is that Christ is head.

[14 : 51] He is head, ruling by his word that can change our hearts by his spirit. And he gives leaders to teach and model and govern in order, we see in Ephesians 4, in order, what verse is it?

Verse 12. To equip the saints. You are a saint if you're a believer. A saint is being set apart for God. The leaders are to equip all the people for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.

Every person in ministry. The priests would have all believers. Verse 15 tells us what to do. We're all to be speaking the truth in love. Verse 16.

It's a bit of a complex statement, but it's, so Christ is the head, but from whom the whole body, and then what does the whole body do?

You've got to jump to a few phrases. The whole body makes the body grow. So it's not the leader's job to make the body grow. It's the body's job to make the body grow.

[16 : 07] Through every joint and ligament, we need everyone speaking the truth in love. The truth being God's truth.

That's when the body grows. That's when we'll be a compelling witness of the salvation in Jesus. So, through God's eyes, what do you think?

Can you see that church is a foretaste of heaven? If we understand our salvation is to be the church, if we understand our calling is primarily about being the church, if you're looking forward to heaven, which is about the church glorified in the presence of God, what will that look like?

It will look like a high value and a high engagement in a local church. So, having refreshed ourselves on God's view of the church, and it's exciting, it's well worth our time going over that.

We need to keep this lens as we come to this question about being the church in a digital age. Now, by digital, let me just define it quickly. Like, I had a digital wristwatch as a kid, and it had this cool button that could light up, and I could read the time at night.

[17 : 49] Now, that electronic device hardly revolutionised the world, and hardly impacted the gathering. But, the age of the internet, and the age of social media, that has revolutionised how we relate to one another, how we think.

I've got to narrow our focus, and I've, even the two topics I've narrowed it to, really, we're just, it's a helicopter view of these topics, but, the first one is, can you do church online?

That's kind of, an obvious question, isn't it? Can we do church online? Obviously, churches are trying to do that, but, can we? The second question is, obviously my introduction hinted towards this, how is social media affecting how we think about relationships in the church, and how we operate in the church?

So, that's where we're heading. Let's go with the first one now. So, first, can you do church online? Well, some claim to get better sermons online.

I don't think that's true. David and I, I think we're the best I've ever heard. I'm glad you're laughing.

[19 : 19] Am I glad? I don't know. Some claim to get better music online. Now, one of the, so, in other words, when you tap into the best resources, you, you come away feeling more spiritually nourished.

So, one of the best examples of online church I came across, they put, this church put heaps of resources, like, our camera, we've got cameras for Zoom, but, I mean, these are like state-of-the-art cameras so that, and all the lighting and the sound is mixed properly so that it feels like you're present.

They had dedicated online pastors to welcome people and engage people in conversation and they had chat rooms for general chit-chat. They had other chat rooms for pastors to listen to you and pray with you after the service.

These are often churches with multiple campus sites and they say that we've got an online online campus, we've got an online congregation and sometimes these congregations, these are thousands of people.

They're reaching a lot of people. Now, let's just assume there is great Bible teaching at these. Let's assume all that and it feels like attending.

[20 : 38] The quality of the service and the singing and the music, it just feels personally encouraging. Can you do church online? I've been a bit sneaky in the way I've framed that question.

Partly to demonstrate, I think, it is so easy to leave God's view of church behind when you start asking these questions. Can you do church online? You've already made a misstep as if it's about attending, a service.

can you be church online? That's the question. If church is about a worship meeting which provides a spiritual service to the customers to nourish you individually and as a family then attending is all that matters.

But if it's about being, if God is glorified through just numbers, some of these churches they're glorifying God way more than we are if it's just about reaching people.

But if God is glorified through unity and true interpersonal, interdependent, speaking the truth in love, community, well, I'm just going to phrase it in a bunch of questions.

[22 : 10] How, in what sense being online are you gathered? Just, in what sense? I suppose there's some level of conversation.

How can the diversity in the body of Christ that crosses ages and crosses cultures and personalities how can that be demonstrated, the peace that Jesus has created and the common worship, how is that expressed online?

Talk to me afterwards if you can convince me. Obviously you know where I'm going that I don't think you can do all these things, but I'm not sure you can really express that. Where is good accountability?

We're told in Ephesians 4, we're going to be tossed to and fro if we're not speaking the truth in love to one another, we will be just little children tossed around by the world. Where is the accountability online?

If you can just choose when to tune in, tune out, how much to say about your life. It's a bit harder to keep life hidden. I've got toothpaste all over me this morning because of getting out this morning.

[23 : 24] Someone might notice that I've obviously declared that now. Being together, there's just, I think, a level of you can't hide as easily. To be accountable to one another.

How can the body sing to one another? As Colossians 3 tells us to do. I think online it's much easier to hide our struggles and our sin.

Like how do you look a brother in the eye who just confess their sin to you and before you've even said a word, just by body language, they already are sensing that they're not condemned by you.

How can you express that? I'm not sure you can do that well online. How do you give that person a hug? How do you hold the hand of a dying person while you pray for them?

How do you relate online at a depth where it is extremely difficult to maintain peace? Because you're so in each other's lives and you've got such differences that we're called be eager to maintain the peace.

[24 : 47] This is going to be hard work. If you can convince me that you can be a functioning, united, interpersonal, interdependent body online, then maybe church online is going to be glorifying to God.

While online churching is relatively new, believers claiming to be part of the universal church and sitting loose to the local church, that's not new, is it?

So I want to clarify, technology is not the problem. It's not the root problem. I don't think. In person, we could easily just form clicks.

In person, we could easily try and hide what's really going on in life, what's going on in our minds. we could tune in or tune out, we can do that all in person.

So technology isn't the root problem. It's whether or not we see church through God's eyes, that's the important thing. If we know who we are, who we're called to be, the body, we're not just throwing the word family out there, like that is what we are.

[26 : 13] But as a tool, online church can supplement and bolster being the body, can't it? Those who are sick and would love to be here, we now have, they can at least be ministered to, to some extent, on Zoom.

What a wonderful, wonderful tool. Our website is often the first point of contact for people finding us. That's a good tool.

It contains recordings for those in Grace Kids in Cresce who miss out on the teaching, who sacrifice being here now for the kids, for the whole body so they can catch up or we can re-listen to it to get more of, soak it in more.

Online gives opportunities I think for isolated missionaries who would love to be part of a local church to be encouraged to connect in maybe. So I think online church can supplement being the body but my opinion is it can't replace it if we stick with what God says the church is.

Okay, that's online church. What about social media? This one's less obvious but perhaps it's having a much bigger impact on us as a church family than in how we relate than the question of online churching.

[27 : 45] Let me ask what's filling your mind and therefore your heart? Is it connection through social media captivating your mind or is it the local church filling your mind?

now I've got to confess to you like even preparing this week like the amount of times I went to Facebook and just scrolled those videos as to just get this little dopamine hit of because I was feeling stressed this week like knowing this stuff and actually changing is another story.

I want to confess that and like I said earlier while technology in and of itself is not the root problem here it's our sinful hearts and not believing what God says when it comes to social media again it's not technology per se that's a problem it's how it's designed it's exploiting us and that's why I want to quote Tristan Harris it is designed to exploit us now that's why I'm saying watch this documentary thing as soon as I say the word documentary like oh boring I hope maybe not please watch it it's really eye open let me just quickly try and summarize consider this the company Meta which as you know owns Facebook Instagram it's worth 734 billion

US dollars like wow now how much are you paying to subscribe to Facebook I haven't paid a cent now the old saying goes if it's free you're the product and that's Tristan Harris's point in this social demo put simply he's saying your attention your attention is how these big tech companies make a lot of money like have you noticed how precise those ads that come up are like talk about feeding my idols it knows exactly what what I want to be thinking about but don't need to be or have you noticed like you've been scrolling Facebook like I admitted to like half an hour has gone by and you've just been watching silly videos or have you noticed that when you put a post or a video online you just want to know how many likes are there how many views have there been or have you noticed when you're using social media it almost feels socially rude not to reply within a few minutes

I feel that I don't know if anyone else does the point is none of this is accidental it's designed to keep us hooked because our attention is big business and so Tristan Harris makes the point that we worry about artificial intelligence kind of taking over us when it's stronger than us when it can take our jobs and when it can beat us at chess we worry about AI when it takes over the world but he's saying AI is already undermining our weaknesses it's already exploiting our weaknesses I'll let you watch it because I've gone into explaining it enough it's I think it's deceptive it's I think it's an example of what we hear in Ephesians 4 of human cunning to toss us to and fro it's deceptive because it promises that we're connecting into the world but what it is is a mirror turned in on self because when you watch Netflix

[31 : 59] I don't know if you watch Netflix if you watch a streaming service you know that when they say hey do you want to watch something like this you know it's tailored to your personal preferences but all these social media things it is tailored to personal choices it knows what our attention is going to and it just keeps feeding whatever grabs our attention it's a mirror on self we think we're connecting with the world but it's actually just reinforcing self it's deceptive I think it promises connection to our diverse world when it's really just reinforcing self personal choice so I'm going to suggest three ways that social media can be filling our minds when it should be the church filling our minds with truth I'm going to start with a more obvious one and that is our attention during church

I'm in two minds about this illustration I'm going to go for it I'll probably forget it at Bible college there was a class a particular class now this only happened in one class it didn't happen all the classes of Bible college because I know this church helped pay my way through Bible college but during the lecture there was this Facebook messenger group of people in the chat just a constant stream of funny remarks based on what's going on in the room now I had this choice do I belong to the crowd and feel like I belong to the group or do I listen that was so tempting the choice do I listen to the truth that is meant to be building up the church I want to share that because

I think that could be an illustration for how social media is grabbing our attention during church yes but also during the week giving our attention is a moral choice what is grabbing our attention if notifications are disrupting you from God's word cut it off it will feel painful cut it off by cutting off I mean if your hand causes you to see and cut it off that's what I'm referring to year because just that feedback loop of promising connection based on your preferences it's just superficial relating and it's filling your mind with consumerism because it's targeting exactly where you're tempted but if you give your mind to the church speaking the truth in love it fills your mind with the sacrifice of Christ it fills your mind with a calling to sacrifice your life for what lasts what are you filling your mind with during church but also throughout the week the second way

I think it could be impacting us is it's deceiving us into a sense of belonging but without truly being known I think a lot of the affirmation that goes on we're creatures we're built for social affirmation we're built for it God designed us that way that so much of what we're affirmed for online isn't it playing happy family pictures and I've got the house and I'm renovating it and look how beautiful I am and apparently Instagram as a side note automatically adds a 5% beauty filter doesn't work on me now you have to clarify whether that's still the case that's a few years old that remark but the point is it's trying to reinforce your value is tied to your beauty come to this platform we try and get affirmation based on work accomplishments and what we're doing and even our personal struggles like when we declare our personal struggles are we really offering for people to speak the truth in love maybe you are maybe you are but being the

Christ church where people are speaking the truth in love it's assuring you of what's true it's saying you are loved by God you are in the family of God not based on anything you do not based on your beauty not based on your house and renovations and not based on anything else you are in the family of God when we give ourselves to truth so we choose between a very superficial form of connection and affirmation or giving ourselves to the church and having deep truth filling our souls and affirming us being truly known you seeing me warts and all and saying you are loved by God now let me help you brother in living for God more that's being truly known the third way I think it can be impacting us is polarization a feedback loop that is based on your preferences it's going to give you a sense that you're well informed but what's really going on is you're surrounding yourself with the same view people with the same view because that's what the algorithms do and the other thing it does is outrage spreads faster than moderate opinion there's more shares of tweets and things where someone is going isn't that person on the other side of this issue an idiot if there's anything if there's any rage that spreads faster so it gives us a sense that we have all the information but really it's put us in a bubble and it's encouraging division but being in

[39 : 07] Christ's church it stretches our own thinking my thoughts being tested by the diversity of the body in an environment of humility in an environment of security knowing we're loved and in that environment that's teaching me to maintain affection while I patiently try and convince one another it's two totally different worlds if we just unthinkingly come at topics through what we look at online we've got to be aware that it's polarising us against one another and we can bring that into the church when we're called to unity for the glory of God's sake so again social media isn't the root cause of the problem we can be it we can be physically present at church and form cliques we can be physically present at church and pretend playing happy families where no one really knows what's going on we can rally around people who have our opinion and cast rocks at everyone else it's not the tech per se but this tech is aimed at undermining our propensity towards those things but then as a tool it hasn't been helpful for this church family the meal rosters we've benefited from those being organised online the amount of good articles and books that people share to one

I know the women I know second hand I'm not reading but second hand through Emma the prayer points you guys share through the Facebook group that's a lovely thing too I know I know there's a lot of organisation that goes into Sunday meeting and midweek groups even our connection with Matt and Grace that's a great feature now that we can encourage them from afar I have no idea of all the one to one conversations that are happening through social media it is a tool don't hear me saying I don't know it's evil 100% evil it's a tool but the church needs to be what's influencing and filling our minds not social media so let me finish by asking what do you do what do we do if we sense the empty promises of being totally connected 24-7 and yet you're not truly known but then you haven't felt the depth of family community in the church like

I've been talking about these six weeks what do you do well I think our experience of church isn't what should guide us we need it our starting point needs to be seeing the church through God's eyes that you are the church you do belong in Christ's body it's according to God's eternal plan it's by the blood of his son you are cherished in his people it's understanding that church is what we are and then it's understanding it's our call to be every joint and ligament working together to build up the body it's believing that that call is what we were designed for and saved for it's knowing you are the family of God that's what's going to get us out of our own heads so can I just encourage you don't wait until you feel connected trust

God that you are connected and dive in do you get the difference don't wait until you feel connected trust God that you are spiritually we are the family of God so dive in brothers and sisters let's not settle for a cheap imitation of connection that revolves around self preferences if we do that we're going to be tossed to and fro by the world because we as the church can show a polarized addicted narcissistic I know that doesn't apply to absolutely everyone but we can show the world a different way we can show the world what unity looks like what peace in Christ looks like and that will give great glory to God we can show the world a glimpse of heaven let me finish with the words of

Paul at the end of chapter three now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think according to the power at work within us to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations forever and ever amen will you pray with me let's pray Lord please rule our minds and hearts Lord I pray that you would give us a vision for the great cost of saving us and who we now are that you are our father that we are one body that we are brothers and sisters called to unity called to growth in holiness

[45 : 40] Lord please give us this vision so that we won't be taken in by a substitute that this world offers that really leaves us feeling empty Lord give us this vision so that we might not just say these doctrines but live it out please help us to be that deeply connected body of Christ so that you might get the glory and pray this in Jesus name Amen