"Internet Church"
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I've watched the discussion on the concept of "Internet church membership" with interest—and some concern. Increasingly, brethren are finding themselves in situations of "spiritual isolation." This is so because (1) liberals have stolen the congregation(s) in their area, (2) once-sound congregations in their area have compromised on fellowship, or (3) brethren have moved to an area where no congregation exists. In some cases a husband and wife or 2 couples (or even an individual) are dealing with this sad situation. At Northpoint where I preach, we have the far larger membership of 8 saints—with 25 buildings within 25 miles of where we meet that have "Church of Christ" on them, and we can't have fellowship with a one of them.

While recognizing this problem, I caution us to consider several matters lest we open what might well be a "Pandora's Box." We must be careful not to create a worse problem than the one we seek to solve. Please consider:

1. This problem is not unique to our times. Brethren faced this problem before the computer/Internet age (e.g., Paul in Athens). What did he do? He preached and converted a few before it was time to move on to Corinth (**Acts 17:16-34**). Although Luke does not say so, does anyone doubt that Paul worshiped on the Lord's day, although by himself—and without Internet access? When 1 person or a family find themselves living alone in a city or a country, are they not the church in that place? And do they not have the same obligation to fulfill the great commission to the best of their ability in that situation (as did Paul in Athens) as they would have were they members of a church of 200 members?

2. It is one thing for a devout husband-wife congregation (or even an individual) to tune in to a Webcast of a Sunday morning sermon because the man is not capable of preaching. This we encourage, as some do this each Lord's day for our sermons at Northpoint (www.northpointcoc.com), but they cease watching us when the sermon is over (in fact, we only broadcast the sermons, not any other part of worship, thus "forcing" watchers to conduct the remainder of their worship activities on their own). It has never entered our minds (nor the minds of those who access our sermons, as far as I know) to count themselves members of a congregation several hundred (or thousand) miles distant. To hear a sermon remotely is one thing, but to consider themselves members of a remote congregation to sing, pray, partake of the Lord's supper, and give with others remotely is quite another.

3. Some simple "logistics" come into play. Will these "memberships" be limited to only 500-1,000 miles from the "mother church", in the US (e.g., Texas), and if so, on what basis (Ricci has already brought England into the discussion). If no distance limits are established, what if isolated brethren (e.g., 1 brother or a couple or three couples) in Borneo, Japan, Communist China, Egypt, Brazil, Russia, New York, or Mexico are granted "Internet" membership in a Texas church? With the International Dateline involved, the "first day of the week" in Texas will for some be Saturday and for others, Monday. Those members in Japan may log on to the "mother church's" worship broadcast, but it will not be "the first day of the week" in Japan (or could the Japanese remote members delay until it was "their" first day of the week, and just play the archive of the previous Sunday's worship recording?).

4. When it's time to appoint elders, how will it be done? Suppose a Japanese, a Brazilian, a Mexican, and a New Yorker are suggested for the eldership. How can brethren so scattered as an "Internet congregation" might become ever check on the qualifications of these suggested men? How can the elders (or men otherwise where there are no elders in the "mother church") make informed, rational decisions relative to the spiritual needs, discipline, and such like of members who are so scattered and live so far distant?

5. What is the basic difference between the "Internet church" concept and what the Boston Church did with its "house churches," all under the Boston elders? "The Hills Church of Christ" (formerly Richland Hills) is about to begin doing the same thing by establishing a "satellite" 25 miles away in west Forth Worth, which will be part of the "mother church" and under her elders. The "Highland Oaks Church of Christ" has had such a "satellite" in a Dallas suburb (Plano) for a year or more. Would not the "Internet members" likewise be mere "satellites" of the "mother church"? Perhaps someone can help me with some basic distinction I am overlooking. The "Internet church" concept has the potential for placing great power and control in the hands of a very few, reminiscent of the eldership abuses of the second and third centuries that led to the monolithic organizational structure of the RC Church.

6. I can't help but think of some things the "Internet church" concept might encourage. If a person can be a member of a congregation via Internet because there is no congregation (sound or otherwise) where he lives, could not a person who lives near a sound congregation hold such membership as well? Would this practice not encourage a member of a sound congregation who became unhappy with same (because the elders reproved him or had to discipline him, because some member(s) "offended" him, because he thought the preaching was too strong, et al.) to use the "Internet membership" concept as a means of avoiding such matters he might find unpleasant, but that are needful for his soul?

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7. We should put this concept to the "universal test." If one brother or sister can be a member of another congregation by "remote membership," why could not every member do so? If one congregation can accept "Internet memberships," then could not all congregations do so? Were this practiced universally, what would it to do the Lord's church?

8. This practice implies the abandonment of the need for a congregational assembly. Could we not just do away with local congregational assemblies except for those non-computer brethren and operate international "congregations" from a few Webcast studios? And could not those who hunt and fish, and sometimes like to do so on the Lord's day, just tune in for "worship" on their iPhones or Blackberries from the deer stand or boat and have "the best of both worlds" (what happens if a big one bites during the Lord's supper)? Those who have so staunchly opposed the "divided assembly" created by the "children's church" and "children's Bible hour" practice ought to see red flags popping up all over regarding the "Internet church" plan. How could you have a more divided assembly that it would produce?