# Ecclesia Reformata in the Digital Era:
# Calvin on Worship and the Online Church

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**Abstract:**
The COVID-19 pandemic and rapid technological advancement have reshaped how churches conduct worship, pushing many congregations toward online platforms. This shift has raised critical theological questions, especially within the Reformed tradition, regarding the authenticity and integrity of digital worship. John Calvin's theology of worship, which emphasizes God's presence, the centrality of Scripture, and the communal nature of the church, provides a valuable framework for evaluating these changes. This article aims to examine how Calvin's theological principles can be applied to online worship. It seeks to explore whether digital worship can remain theologically coherent within a Reformed framework and how churches can adapt Calvin's insights for contemporary contexts. Using a theological-literary approach, this study analyzes Calvin's writings on worship—particularly his views on Scripture, prayer, sacraments, and the gathered community—and compares them with the practices and challenges of online worship. Scholarly perspectives on digital religion are also engaged to assess the ongoing debate. The study finds that while online worship cannot fully replace the richness of physical gatherings—especially in relation to the sacraments—it can still nurture genuine spiritual experiences. If grounded in Scripture, focused on God's presence, and supported by intentional practices of fellowship, online worship may uphold Reformed theological integrity. However, it requires careful pastoral oversight to avoid doctrinal dilution and to maintain the centrality of Word and prayer.

**Contribution:**
This article contributes to the ongoing discourse on digital worship by providing practical guidelines rooted in Calvin's theology. It demonstrates that online worship, though limited, can be a meaningful expression of faith when conducted with theological awareness, thus helping churches navigate the digital age while remaining faithful to their Reformed heritage.

**Keywords:** online worship, John Calvin's theology, presence of God, church, digital worship, technology.

**INTRODUCTION**

The internet has transformed how people interact with all aspects of their lives, including religious practices. According to Campbell, the internet has enabled the creation of new spaces for religious engagement, often bypassing traditional structures of worship, thus creating a new form of "digital religion."[1] Worship, as a central act of Christian faith, is now increasingly practiced through online platforms like YouTube and Zoom, particularly during global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.[2] This technological shift raised the critical question of whether such online worship can maintain the theological integrity that has long defined Christian practice, particularly in the Reformed tradition.[3]

Calvin's theology of worship, which stresses the importance of the Word, the sacraments, and the gathered community, provides a useful framework to address these questions. As McGrath observes, Calvin's insistence on the centrality of the Word of God in worship is foundational to his entire theological system.[4] In particular, Ferguson states Calvin's doctrine of the church, which emphasizes the visible body of believers, presents a challenge in the context of online worship, where the physical presence of the congregation is absent.[5] The role of the sacraments, such as baptism and the Lord's Supper, which Calvin viewed as essential expressions of God's grace, also demands careful consideration in digital contexts.[6]

The shift towards digital worship has been a focal point in scholarly debates surrounding the relationship between technology and religion. Nyarko discusses the theological challenges posed by online worship, particularly the perceived loss of a personal encounter with God in virtual spaces.[7] This concern, which also highlights the

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[1] Heidi A. Campbell and Ruth Tsuria, *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in Digital Media.* 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2022), 45.

[2] Heidi A. Campbell and Ruth Tsuria, *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in Digital Media*, 28.

[3] Elaine Graham. "Theological Reflection". In *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*, edited by Brendan N. Wolfe et al. University of St Andrews, November 18, 2022. https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/TheologicalReflection.

[4] Alister E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction.* 4th ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2021), 60.

[5] S. B. Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2002), 33.

[6] Thomas Henry Louis Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 102.

[7] Ernest Nyarko. "The Church, Digital Technology and Media: A Biblical Reflection on Romans 8:19-23". *Journal of Education and Learning Technology (JELT)* 4, no. 1 (2023): 1-11. https://doi.org/10.38159/jelt.2023411.

limitations of virtual participation in the sacraments, has prompted Reformed theologians to reassess the significance of communal worship in the digital age.[8] Some scholars, however, argue that digital worship, while different, can still be theologically meaningful, provided it prioritizes the Word and ensures that the virtual community remains connected in meaningful ways.[9]

Calvin's thoughts on the nature of worship and the church's role in facilitating genuine encounters with God provide a critical foundation for examining online worship. As Bavinck notes, Calvin's view of worship is not limited to ritual acts but is deeply concerned with the internal disposition of the worshipper, which is mediated by the Holy Spirit.[10] For Calvin, the worship experience, regardless of the medium, must reflect the encounter between the believer and God, with an emphasis on the truth of God's Word and the sincerity of the worshipping community.[11] While Calvin's ecclesiology emphasizes the physical gathering of the church, it does not preclude the possibility of the Spirit working in and through mediated experiences of worship.[12]

The central thesis of this paper is that online worship can be theologically coherent within a Reformed framework when it is understood as a mediated experience of God's presence, as long as it emphasizes the core elements of worship: the Word, the sacraments, and the gathered community. According to McGrath, Calvin's emphasis on the Word in worship allows for the digital transmission of God's message to remain theologically valid, provided it is faithfully proclaimed.[13] The role of the sacraments in online worship remains a contentious issue, but Parker suggests that digital formats can still facilitate a meaningful engagement with the sacraments, particularly if they are accompanied by the appropriate pastoral oversight and theological grounding.[14] Moreover, online worship can continue to foster a sense of community among believers,

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[8] Joseph Roso. "Streamable Services: Affinities for Streaming in Pre-Pandemic Congregational Worship". *Religions* 14, no. 5 (2023): 641. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14050641.

[9] Heidi A. Campbell and Ruth Tsuria, *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in Digital Media*, 40.

[10] Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: A Systematic Theology* (Vol. 2; Baker Academic, 2004), 88.

[11] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. H. Beveridge (Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 314.

[12] S. B. Ferguson, *The Church of Christ*, 31.

[13] Allister E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 61; A. W. Gorrell, *Always on: Practicing faith in a new media landscape* (Baker Academic, 2019); Peter M. Phillips. "Digital Theology and a Potential Theological Approach to a Metaphysics of Information." *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 58, no. 3 (2023): 770–788. https://doi.org/10.1111/zygo.12883.

[14] Thomas Henry Louis Parker, *John Calvin*, 105.

even if they are physically dispersed, as long as the church's mission remains focused on the worship of God and the proclamation of His Word.[15]

In examining Calvin's theology, this paper will explore how his ideas about worship and the church can inform contemporary understandings of online worship. It will argue that while online worship presents challenges, it can retain its theological integrity by prioritizing the Word, the sacraments, and the presence of the community, even in a virtual form. This theological perspective, grounded in the Reformed tradition, offers an important lens through which to evaluate the legitimacy and meaning of online worship in the digital age.[16]

**RESEARCH METHODS**

This study uses a qualitative theological approach with literature analysis. A qualitative theological approach with literature analysis refers to a method of research that interprets theological concepts through the study of primary and secondary texts, aiming to understand doctrinal meanings rather than measure them numerically.[17] The first stage examines Calvin's writings, especially *Institutes of the Christian Religion* and *Treatise on the Sacraments*, to explore his views on worship, Scripture, God's presence, and the sacraments. These primary sources are interpreted with the help of classical Reformed theologians such as McGrath, Bavinck, Welker et al., Ferguson, Van't Spijker, and McNeill, ensuring that the study is grounded in the Reformed tradition.

The second stage places this theological foundation in conversation with current discussions of online worship. Studies on digital religion by Campbell, Nyarko, Oliver, Grant et al., Gorrell, Graham, Kurlberg, and Müller & Friemel provide insights into how technology shapes worship and community. By comparing Calvin's principles with these contemporary perspectives, the study evaluates the theological integrity of online worship and offers practical guidelines for churches in the digital age.

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[15] Elaine Graham. "Being, Making and Imagining: Toward a Practical Theology of Technology." *Culture and Religion* 10, no. 2 (July 2009): 221–236. https://doi.org/10.1080/14755610903077588.
[16] Joseph Roso. "Streamable Services: Affinities for Streaming in Pre-Pandemic Congregational Worship": 641.
[17] Richard R. Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008); John Swinton and Mowat, Harriet. *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM Press, 2016).

**RESULTS**

**Theological Foundations of Worship in John Calvin's Thought**

John Calvin's theological vision of worship goes beyond mere rituals, emphasizing the sovereign presence of God and the centrality of the Word in the worshiping community. At the heart of Calvin's theology is the notion that worship is an encounter with God mediated through His Word and the sacraments.[18] Worship is seen as the place where God makes Himself known through the proclamation of Scripture, prayer, and the observance of the sacraments. Calvin's theological framework critiques the practices of the medieval Church, asserting that true worship is not bound by human traditions or rituals, but is rooted in the simplicity of biblical principles.[19] Worship, therefore, is not simply about outward actions, but an inward response to the divine revelation that takes place in the context of the Church, which Calvin defines as both a visible and invisible community.[20]

The centrality of God's presence in worship is a distinctive feature of Calvin's thought. In contrast to medieval conceptions of worship, which often placed emphasis on human mediation, Calvin emphasizes that God is the primary actor in worship. True worship occurs when God reveals Himself to His people, not through human invention but through the means He has established—namely, Scripture, prayer, and sacraments. Calvin stresses that God's presence is not confined to physical spaces or rituals but is encountered by faith through the Holy Spirit's work. The gathered community, in its faith, experiences God's presence through the Word.[21] This central emphasis on God's presence shifts the focus of worship from human activity to divine action. As Bavinck notes, the distinction between the worship of God and human-directed rituals becomes paramount in Calvin's ecclesiology, where God's actions are what make worship meaningful.[22]

In addition to God's presence, the Word of God holds a central place in Calvin's vision of worship. The preaching of Scripture is the primary means through which God

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[18] John Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*. Translated by H. Beveridge. (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1956), 27; John H. Leith, John Calvin: The Beginnings of the Reformation. (Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 54.

[19] John T. McNeill. "The Theology of John Calvin." *Theology* 113, no. 875 (2010): 381-382. https://doi.org/10.1177/0040571X1011300518; Karin Maag, *Worshiping with the Reformers* (Grand Rapids, MI: InterVarsity Press, 2021).

[20] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 314.

[21] Allister E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 142; Ernest Nyarko. "The Church, Digital Technology and Media: A Biblical Reflection on Romans 8:19-23": 1-11.

[22] Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 82.

speaks to His people. Calvin insists that the Word of God is the most powerful means of communion with God in worship. The preacher is not a mediator in the sense of a Catholic priest but rather a servant who faithfully proclaims the Word. The significance of preaching lies not in the eloquence of the preacher but in the power of the Word to convict, teach, and transform the believer. As McGrath points out, Calvin maintained that "the Word is the chief means by which the believer is drawn into communion with God."[23] Calvin's concern was that worship should be grounded in Scripture, with all other aspects—whether sacraments or rituals—being secondary to the centrality of the preached Word. This conviction led Calvin to critique medieval practices that he saw as distractions from the Word, such as the veneration of saints or the use of images.[24] Worship, for Calvin, was primarily about responding to God's revelation through the Scriptures.

Moreover, Calvin emphasized that worship must remain faithful to Scripture, the ultimate authority for the church. This conviction was a driving force behind his rejection of many medieval practices that he believed were not founded on Scripture. For example, he opposed the use of images, as he believed they were not scriptural and distracted the faithful from the true worship of God.[25] Calvin's approach to worship was thus centered on the notion that Scripture alone was sufficient for guiding the church in proper worship. For Calvin, any practice that did not find its roots in Scripture was to be discarded. This principle of *sola scriptura* (Scripture alone) in worship is one of the key tenets of Reformed worship today.[26]

In Calvin's thought, the Church plays a crucial role in preserving the purity of worship. Calvin's ecclesiology is shaped by the notion of the Church as both visible and invisible. The visible Church consists of the gathered congregation, while the invisible Church is made up of the elect, whom only God knows. This distinction is not merely theoretical; it has practical implications for the way worship is conducted. The visible Church, as the community of believers, has the responsibility to ensure that worship remains faithful to Scripture and centered on God's revelation. Calvin insists that the Church, as the body of Christ, has a duty to maintain the purity of worship, ensuring that

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[23] A. E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 142.
[24] John T. McNeill, *The Theology of John Calvin*, 381-382; David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams*. (Eerdmans, 1995), 48.
[25] Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today*, 120.
[26] John T. McNeill, *The Theology of John Calvin*, 381-382.

it aligns with the biblical teachings of the apostles.[27] This vision of the Church's role in worship places a significant responsibility on the community to maintain the sanctity and truth of worship practices.

The role of the sacraments in Calvin's theology is also integral to his understanding of worship. Calvin emphasized that the sacraments are not mere symbols but are means by which God's grace is conveyed to the believer. For Calvin, the Lord's Supper is a spiritual communion in which the believer receives Christ's body and blood by faith, through the work of the Holy Spirit. Calvin rejected the Roman Catholic view of the Eucharist as a re-sacrifice and instead emphasized that the sacraments are instruments of grace, strengthening the believer's faith and confirming God's covenant promises.[28] This understanding of the sacraments reflects Calvin's overall approach to worship, where every element—whether preaching, prayer, or sacrament—serves to draw the believer into communion with God and strengthen their faith.[29]

Calvin's critique of medieval worship was also a critique of its ritualistic excesses. He rejected the emphasis on human invention and emphasized the need for simplicity in worship. For Calvin, true worship was not about the external forms or the pomp of ritual, but about the sincere, faithful response of the heart to God's revelation.[30] Calvin's theology of worship calls for a return to the simplicity and purity of worship practices as found in the early Church, focusing on the Word of God, prayer, and the sacraments, and excluding any practices that could obscure these central elements.[31]

This theological framework for worship reflects Calvin's broader understanding of the Church and its role in the life of the believer. The Church is not merely a social institution, but the body of Christ, where believers gather to hear God's Word, partake of the sacraments, and experience His presence. For Calvin, the gathering of believers is the place where God's Word is proclaimed, where the sacraments are administered, and where the community of believers is formed and nurtured in faith.[32] The church, then, is

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[27] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 319.

[28] John Calvin, *Treatise on the Sacraments. Translated by Henry Beveridge*. (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2007), 60; John T. McNeill, *The Theology of John Calvin*, 381-382.

[29] T. F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church*. (T&T Clark, 1996), 182; Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Church of Christ*, 148.

[30] Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 85.

[31] Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Church of Christ*, 118.

[32] Thomas Henry Louis Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 92.

the primary locus of worship, where believers come together to worship in truth and spirit.

Calvin's critique of medieval worship, his emphasis on the centrality of Scripture, and his understanding of the sacraments and the Church's role in maintaining pure worship are all integral to Reformed worship practices today. Reformed churches continue to focus on the centrality of the Word and the sacraments, rejecting any practices that obscure or detract from these central elements. Calvin's theological principles on worship continue to shape not only Reformed liturgical practices but also the broader understanding of what it means to worship God in spirit and truth.[33]

**The Rise of Online Worship: Challenges and Opportunities**

Technological advancements, particularly the internet, have brought about profound changes in various aspects of human life, including Christian worship. Online worship has rapidly expanded since the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced churches worldwide to adapt to circumstances that limited physical gatherings. The transition to digital worship presents both significant challenges and opportunities for maintaining the essence of true Christian worship.[34] The pandemic has compelled the Church to rethink its understanding of worship, both theologically and practically, including considering the theological impact of worship conducted online.

One of the greatest challenges faced in online worship is the loss of the physical dimension of fellowship among believers. John Calvin emphasized the importance of worship as a physical gathering where believers come together to celebrate God's presence and deepen their relationship with Him.[35] In *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin argued that physical gatherings in worship have profound theological significance, as the Church is the body of Christ, composed of people united in concrete and tangible worship.[36] In online worship, although people can access services from their homes, the loss of direct interaction and physical experience of gathering together poses a significant

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[33] Michael Welker, Ulrich Möller, & Michael Weinrich (Ed.). *Calvin Today: Reformed Theology and the Future of the Church* (London: T&T Clark, 2013).

[34] Larry D. Witzel. "The Digital Transformation of Church Communication". *Digital Transformation of Church*, School of Communication & the Arts, Liberty University, November 26, 2023. https://larrywitzel.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/The-Digital-Transformation-of-Church-Communication.pdf.

[35] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 943.

[36] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 935.

challenge to preserving the meaning and essence of worship according to Reformed theology.

Additionally, online worship presents challenges in administering sacraments, particularly the Lord's Supper. For Calvin, sacraments are means of grace that cannot be effectively transmitted through digital media. He taught that sacraments must be administered in physical gatherings, where the congregation receives bread and wine as symbols of Christ's body and blood. Performing sacraments through online platforms, without the physical element and communal fellowship, raises serious concerns about its validity within Reformed theology.[37] Therefore, while online worship offers convenience and wider accessibility, many churches are reconsidering how to maintain the completeness of sacraments in virtual worship, given the limitations of digital media.

However, despite these challenges, online worship also provides several opportunities for the Church. One of the greatest opportunities is the ability to reach a wider audience, including those who are geographically distant or face physical limitations. Online worship allows churches to function as global platforms, connecting people from all over the world.[38] From a Calvinistic theological perspective, this is an opportunity to spread God's Word more widely, fulfilling the Church's mission to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19-20). In this regard, online worship can serve as an effective tool to reach individuals who were previously unable to attend church physically due to geographic or economic constraints.[39]

Moreover, online worship also provides accessibility for those with physical limitations or mobility challenges to remain connected with the church community. Many individuals experience difficulties going to church, such as the elderly, the sick, or those living in remote areas. Online worship becomes a means for them to continue participating in services and receiving the preaching of God's Word without leaving their homes. This is particularly relevant today, where more people seek comfort and flexibility in their worship practices.[40] Online worship enables churches to serve a broader and

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[37] Michael Welker, Ulrich Möller, & Michael Weinrich (Ed.). *Calvin Today: Reformed Theology and the Future of the Church*; W. Van't Spijker, *Calvin: A Brief Guide to His Life and Thought* (Louisville, KY: Westminter John Knoxx, 2009), 115.

[38] S. B. Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2002), 132.

[39] Larry D. Witzel. "The Digital Transformation of Church Communication".

[40] John T. McNeill, *The Theology of John Calvin*, 381-382.

more diverse community, offering space for those with special needs to stay connected within the Christian fellowship.

Online worship also offers opportunities to enhance the quality of worship through technology. Churches can now use various digital media to enrich the worship experience, such as incorporating video, music, and other visual elements[41]. This also allows churches to reach younger audiences who may be more familiar with technology and social media in their daily lives. Thus, technology can be used to improve the quality and appeal of worship, as long as it remains faithful to sound theological principles.[42] This aligns with Calvin's principle that worship should remain simple and centered on God's Word, even while using modern tools to enhance the spiritual experience of believers.

However, there are also risks involved in the use of technology in online worship, particularly concerning the quality of doctrine and teaching presented. In the digital realm, anyone can access various religious content, including teachings that may deviate from sound Biblical doctrine. Therefore, churches must be cautious to ensure that their online worship services are not infiltrated with teachings that are contrary to the Word of God.[43] Calvin emphasized the importance of the church as the guardian of doctrinal purity, which must ensure that every worship service, whether physical or virtual, upholds the unadulterated truth of Scripture. Careful oversight of the teachings delivered in online worship is crucial to maintaining the integrity of Reformed theology and avoiding any distortion of Biblical truth.

While online worship presents various challenges, including the loss of physical fellowship and difficulties with sacramental practices, it also offers many opportunities for the Church. Online worship enables churches to reach a wider audience, provide accessibility for those hindered by physical limitations, and adapt to technological advancements in the increasingly digital world. However, churches must remain vigilant to preserve doctrinal integrity and ensure that the essence of worship is maintained. Thus, even though worship is conducted online, the core purpose of glorifying God and nurturing the spiritual life of the Church should remain uncompromised.

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[41] Peter M. Phillips. "Digital Theology and a Potential Theological Approach to a Metaphysics of Information".

[42] Larry D. Witzel. "The Digital Transformation of Church Communication"; B. Taylor, *Sharing faith using social media*, (Grove Books, 2016); Ochenia Faith Opade. "Perspectives on Digital Evangelism: Exploring the Intersection of Technology and Faith". *African-British Journals* 6, no.1 (2023): 15-24. https://www.doi.org/10.52589/AJCHRT-IDAP2P2M.

[43] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 946.

**DISCUSSION**

**Calvin's Theology Applied to Online Worship**

John Calvin's theology, which places a strong emphasis on the sovereignty of God, the centrality of Scripture, the importance of communal worship, and the proper administration of sacraments, offers a rich framework for considering the challenges and opportunities of online worship. As the digital age transforms[44] the ways in which the Church practices worship, applying Calvin's theological principles to online worship can help navigate the balance between maintaining doctrinal integrity and embracing the technological possibilities of our time. This section examines how Calvin's core theological tenets, including his views on the nature of worship, the Church, and sacraments, can be understood in the context of online worship.

*The Centrality of God's Presence in Worship*

At the heart of Calvin's understanding of worship is the idea of God's presence. Calvin firmly believed that worship is not just an activity but a means by which the believer encounters the living God. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin argued that true worship must be grounded in the awareness of God's sovereign presence, and this was not dependent on the physical location of the congregation.[45] For Calvin, worship is not merely a ritual or performance but an act of divine communion. Applying this principle to online worship raises significant theological questions: Can the same sense of God's presence be experienced virtually as it is in a physical gathering?

While Calvin was deeply committed to the physical nature of the gathered Church, he also recognized the transcendent nature of God, whose presence is not confined to specific places or times.[46] Online worship, in this sense, could be viewed as a valid means for experiencing God's presence, albeit with certain limitations. Technology can serve as a vehicle for people to gather virtually, hear the Word proclaimed, and engage in prayer. However, it is crucial that churches maintain an emphasis on God's presence in these

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[44] Andy Brubacher Kaethler. "The Enduring Significance of the Incarnation for the Church in a Digital Age." *The Conrad Grebel Review* 39, no. 2 (Spring 2021): 95-117. https://uwaterloo.ca/grebel/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/cgr-spring-21-brubacher-kaethler.pdf.

[45] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 945.

[46] John Piper, "The Supremacy of God in Missions Through Worship". *Grace & Peace,* August 21, 2008. https://wdennisgriffith.blog/2008/08/21/the-supremacy-of-god-in-missions-through-worship.

virtual environments, ensuring that technology does not replace the transcendent reality of divine encounter.[47]

### The Role of Scripture in Worship

One of the cornerstones of Calvin's theology is the centrality of Scripture in worship. Calvin argued that worship should be centered around the proclamation of God's Word and the reading of Scripture.[48] For Calvin, Scripture is the primary means through which God communicates His will to His people, and it must hold a central place in the worship service. Calvin's conviction was that every aspect of worship should be in harmony with the Word of God and that the preached Word holds a unique power to shape the lives of believers.

In the context of online worship, the digital platforms used for the proclamation of Scripture should preserve the integrity of the biblical text. Virtual worship provides an opportunity for greater access to Scripture, enabling individuals to hear the Word even when they cannot attend a physical service. Platforms such as livestreams, podcasts, or YouTube can all facilitate the preaching of God's Word to a global audience. However, Calvin would caution against using technology in ways that distort or trivialize Scripture.[49] Churches should prioritize fidelity to the text, ensuring that the preaching remains faithful to the biblical message and that the virtual environment does not hinder the clarity or depth of the message being communicated.

Moreover, Calvin stressed that Scripture must be interpreted within the context of the Church and its tradition. The ecclesiastical context of Scripture interpretation cannot be easily bypassed in the digital age. As online worship spreads, it is essential that churches maintain robust teaching on the interpretation of Scripture to guard against the potential for individualistic or misinformed readings of the Word.[50] Therefore, Calvin's emphasis on sound doctrine and the role of the Church in interpreting Scripture is particularly relevant in online worship settings, where the lack of face-to-face interaction can sometimes foster a more individualized approach to Scripture.

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[47] [47] Larry D. Witzel. "The Digital Transformation of Church Communication".

[48] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 907.

[49] S. B. Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2002), 148.

[50] Samson Obaloluwa Ojo, Ibitayo Johnson Adelaja, Timothy Oladotun Adio, and Adebayo Ola Afolaranmi. "Assessing the Impact of Technology on Church Services and Youth Engagement". *African-British Journals* 7, no. 3 (2024): 58-72. https://www.doi.org/10.52589/BJCNIT-BR3RLAIL.

### The Role of the Church as the Body of Christ

For Calvin, the Church is the visible body of Christ in the world, and worship is a communal act of the gathered believers. Calvin viewed the Church as essential to the life of the believer, both in terms of its role in administering the means of grace and as the community where believers are nurtured in the faith. In his theology, the Church is the place where God's people gather to receive the Word, participate in the sacraments, and experience mutual edification.[51]

Online worship, however, challenges the traditional notion of the Church as a physical gathering. The communal aspect of worship is diminished when believers are separated by screens, unable to interact face-to-face in the same way they would in a physical gathering. The question then arises: Can online worship truly embody the concept of the Church as the body of Christ? Calvin would assert that the essence of the Church is found not in its physical location but in its participation in the worship of God, with the Word being proclaimed and the sacraments administered. Yet, the loss of physical proximity and interaction means that online worship can only approximate the communal aspect of worship rather than fully realize it.

Despite these challenges, the internet allows for a form of virtual fellowship that brings believers together across geographical boundaries. Online worship services can allow members of the Church to participate in communal worship regardless of their physical location.[52] While the lack of physical presence is a significant challenge, the Church can use online platforms to foster a sense of global unity and connection, where the body of Christ is united in worship despite being physically apart.[53] Thus, while online worship may lack the full embodiment of the Church, it provides an opportunity for Christians to participate in the broader community of believers.

### The Administration of Sacraments

A particularly contentious issue in the application of Calvin's theology to online worship is the administration of the sacraments. Calvin placed significant emphasis on the role of the sacraments in the life of the Church, particularly the Lord's Supper. For

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[51] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 945.
[52] Benedikt Levin Heymann. "The Public Character of Church in the Digital Age". *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 27 (2025): 1-19. https://doi.org/10.1111/ijst.12775; Willem H. Oliver. "From in-person to online worship": a2404. https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v43i1.2404.
[53] John T. McNeill, *The Theology of John Calvin*, 381-382.

Calvin, the sacraments are outward signs of inward grace, and they must be administered properly in accordance with the Word of God. The physical participation in the sacraments is crucial to their theological meaning.[54]

In online worship, the absence of the physical elements of the sacraments raises questions about the validity and efficacy of virtual communion. Calvin's theology would likely deem online sacraments problematic since they lack the tangible, physical participation that is central to their significance. The use of bread and wine, or their substitutes, in the Lord's Supper, is not only symbolic but also a means of grace, requiring believers to partake physically.[55] Online communion, therefore, risks reducing the sacrament to a mere symbol or ritual, disconnected from its intended purpose as a means of grace within the gathered body.

However, some theologians have argued that the absence of physical presence does not negate the validity of online communion if the worship service maintains a focus on the Word and prayer.[56] From a Calvinistic standpoint, online worship could still serve as a context for spiritual nourishment if it is marked by the faithful proclamation of Scripture and prayer. Nonetheless, the sacraments, especially the Lord's Supper, cannot be fully realized outside of a physical gathering where the Church, as the body of Christ, is present.

### The Challenge of Preserving Doctrinal Integrity

One of the major challenges of online worship is the potential for doctrinal dilution or confusion. The internet is filled with a wide variety of Christian teachings, some of which may not align with Reformed theology. Calvin strongly emphasized that worship must be doctrinally pure, grounded in Scripture, and faithful to the Reformed confessions.[57] Online worship, by its very nature, allows for a wider diversity of theological perspectives to enter the worship space. This can pose a danger to the integrity of the worship experience, especially when individuals have access to teachings that may stray from orthodox Reformed doctrine.

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[54] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 941.
[55] W. Van't Spijker, *Calvin: A Brief Guide to His Life and Thought*, 115.
[56] Richard Burridge, *Holy Communion in Contagious Times: Celebrating the Eucharist in the Everyday and Online Worlds* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2022); August E. Grant, Amanda F. C. Sturgill, Chiung Hwang Chen, and Daniel A. Stout (ed.). *Religion Online: How Digital Technology Is Changing the Way We Worship and Pray*. Volume 1. (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2019).
[57] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 902.

In online worship settings, Calvin's emphasis on the authority of the Church in interpreting and teaching Scripture becomes critical. The Church must continue to safeguard doctrinal integrity, even in virtual spaces, to ensure that online worship is marked by theological accuracy and fidelity to God's Word. It is essential that online worship services remain under the oversight of qualified ministers who can provide sound doctrinal teaching, ensuring that the worship experience remains faithful to the traditions of the Reformed faith.[58]

Applying Calvin's theology to online worship offers valuable insights into how the Church can maintain doctrinal integrity while embracing the opportunities afforded by digital technology. Calvin's commitment to the centrality of God's presence, the authority of Scripture, the communal nature of worship, and the proper administration of sacraments serves as a guide for navigating the complexities of online worship. While digital platforms provide new opportunities for outreach and accessibility, they also pose significant challenges, particularly in terms of the communal aspects of worship and the administration of sacraments.[59] As the Church continues to engage with these challenges, Calvin's theology provides a necessary framework for ensuring that online worship remains faithful to its theological roots, preserving the integrity of the worship experience in a digital age.

## Practical Guidelines for Online Worship Based on Calvin's Theology

The transition to online worship has raised numerous challenges for the Church, particularly in maintaining doctrinal integrity and fostering genuine spiritual engagement. John Calvin's theological principles can provide a solid foundation for addressing these challenges and ensuring that online worship remains faithful to its theological roots. Drawing from Calvin's teachings on the centrality of God's presence, the primacy of Scripture, the role of the Church, and the proper administration of sacraments, this section outlines practical guidelines for conducting online worship that honors these key elements of Calvin's theology. By following these guidelines, churches can preserve the integrity of their worship services and continue to serve their congregations effectively in a digital age.

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[58] John Piper, "The Supremacy of God in Missions Through Worship".

[59] T. E. Ncapodi. "Holy Communion in Contagious Times: Celebrating the Eucharist in the Everyday and Online Worlds". *Acta Theologica* 43, no. 1 (2023): 241–242. https://doi.org/10.38140/at.v43i1.7396.

### *Maintaining the Centrality of God's Presence*

Calvin's theology emphasized the importance of God's presence in worship. According to Calvin, worship is primarily about encountering the living God, who is sovereign over all creation.[60] For online worship to remain faithful to Calvin's vision, churches must ensure that the experience of God's presence is central to the service, even in a virtual context. This can be achieved through intentional prayer, the reading of Scripture, and the proclamation of the Word. In online worship, churches should carefully structure the service to ensure that each part of the liturgy points to God's presence and encourages believers to engage in heartfelt worship.[61]

While online worship can lack the physical proximity of gathered believers, technology does not necessarily prevent the experience of God's presence. Calvin himself affirmed that God's presence transcends physical space and time.[62] Thus, churches should focus on creating an environment that fosters spiritual attentiveness and reverence, even through digital mediums. For example, the use of visuals and worship music can help set a reflective tone, guiding participants to focus on the divine presence. Additionally, it is essential that the worship leaders model reverence and seriousness in their conduct, as their example can encourage the congregation to similarly engage with the service.[63]

### *Emphasizing the Word of God*

Calvin placed great importance on the role of Scripture in worship, considering it to be the primary means by which God speaks to His people.[64] This principle is crucial when adapting Calvin's theology to online worship. One of the practical guidelines for online worship based on Calvin's thought is the central role of Scripture in every service. Churches should ensure that the Word is faithfully read and preached, upholding the

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[60] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 945.
[61] Joseph Roso. "Streamable Services: Affinities for Streaming in Pre-Pandemic Congregational Worship": 641; T. E. Ncapodi. "Holy Communion in Contagious Times: Celebrating the Eucharist in the Everyday and Online Worlds": 241–242; Jonas K. Kurlberg. "Liturgy as Persuasive Technology: Exploring Liturgical Practices in Online Worship." In *Ecclesiology for a Digital Church*, edited by Heidi A. Campbell and John Dyer. London: SCM Press, 2021. https://scmpress.hymnsam.co.uk/media/75108/ecclesiology-digital-age-contents-page.pdf.
[62] John Piper, "The Supremacy of God in Missions Through Worship".
[63] Samson Obaloluwa Ojo, Ibitayo Johnson Adelaja, Timothy Oladotun Adio, and Adebayo Ola Afolaranmi. "Assessing the Impact of Technology on Church Services and Youth Engagement": 58-72.
[64] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 907.

doctrinal purity of Scripture. In the digital age,[65] this can involve broadcasting sermon videos, live-streaming Bible readings, and encouraging virtual discussions about the text.

To preserve the integrity of the proclamation of Scripture, churches should avoid the temptation to reduce the sermon to a casual or entertaining presentation. Instead, the sermon should focus on exposition and application, faithfully unpacking the biblical text and connecting it to the lives of the congregation.[66] Since online platforms can sometimes contribute to a fragmented or distracted worship experience, it is important that the preacher remain clear, engaging, and theologically rigorous. The use of Scripture in a way that both educates and nurtures the faith of the congregation is essential in ensuring that online worship remains aligned with Calvin's emphasis on the centrality of the Word.

### Fostering Community and the Role of the Church

Another critical aspect of Calvin's theology is the communal nature of the Church. Calvin taught that the Church is the visible body of Christ, and worship is an activity best carried out in community. Even though online worship may involve digital spaces, churches should strive to maintain a sense of community and fellowship. This can be achieved by utilizing online platforms that allow for interaction among participants. For example, churches can incorporate live chat functions, encourage congregational responses, and provide opportunities for prayer and support.[67]

Furthermore, it is essential that online worship does not replace the physical gathering of the Church. While virtual worship offers opportunities for broader accessibility, Calvin's doctrine of the Church emphasizes the need for physical presence in the sacraments and the fellowship of believers.[68] Therefore, online worship should be seen as a supplement to, rather than a replacement for, in-person worship. Churches should encourage members to return to physical worship when possible, especially as pandemic restrictions ease, while also offering online options for those who are unable to attend in person.[69]

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[65] Alexander Chow. "What Has Jerusalem to Do with the Internet? World Christianity and Digital Culture." *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 47, no. 1 (2022): 23-31. https://doi.org/10.1177/23969393221101349.

[66] S. B. Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2002), 148.

[67] Benedikt Levin Heymann. "The Public Character of Church in the Digital Age": 1-19.

[68] W. Van't Spijker, *Calvin: A Brief Guide to His Life and Thought*, 115.

[69] John T. McNeill, *The Theology of John Calvin*, 381-382; Jonas K. Kurlberg. "Liturgy as Persuasive Technology: Exploring Liturgical Practices in Online Worship".

To further cultivate a sense of community, churches can make use of digital platforms to facilitate virtual fellowship after services. Small group meetings, prayer chains, and other forms of online interaction can be vital in helping church members stay connected and continue their spiritual growth, even in a virtual environment. Calvin would likely support these efforts, as he understood the Church to be a place where believers not only hear the Word but also share in the communal experience of faith.[70]

### Proper Administration of the Sacraments

One of the most significant challenges in applying Calvin's theology to online worship is the administration of the sacraments, particularly the Lord's Supper. Calvin maintained that the sacraments were essential means of grace, and they must be administered in accordance with Scripture.[71] In online worship, however, the lack of physical presence makes it difficult to administer sacraments in the traditional sense. The question arises: Can online worship be considered a valid context for administering the sacraments?

In Calvin's view, the sacraments are not merely symbolic but actual means of grace, and their administration requires the gathered body of believers.[72] Given this, online communion poses significant theological challenges, as participants cannot physically partake of the bread and wine together. Churches that wish to remain faithful to Calvin's theology should therefore be cautious about celebrating sacraments virtually. Instead, they may consider postponing the administration of the Lord's Supper until the congregation can gather physically. However, they can still maintain a focus on spiritual nourishment through the Word and prayer, which Calvin viewed as central to worship.[73]

When online worship does involve the Lord's Supper, churches should emphasize the theological significance of the sacrament and explain the limitations of virtual participation. Calvin would likely encourage a careful reflection on the meaning of the sacraments and the necessity of gathering together for their proper administration. For

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[70] John Piper, "The Supremacy of God in Missions Through Worship".
[71] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 941.
[72] S. B. Ferguson, *The Church of Christ*, 160.
[73] W. Van't Spijker, *Calvin: A Brief Guide to His Life and Thought*, 110; Richard Burridge, *Holy Communion in Contagious Times: Celebrating the Eucharist in the Everyday and Online Worlds*.

Calvin, the sacrament was an expression of the community's shared faith, and this communal dimension is lost in the absence of physical presence.[74]

### Guarding Against Doctrinal Error

As online worship expands, there is an increasing risk of doctrinal error, especially given the accessibility of a wide range of theological perspectives on digital platforms. Calvin was deeply concerned about doctrinal purity in the life of the Church, and he would likely urge caution in the use of online worship materials that may not align with orthodox Reformed theology. One practical guideline is that churches must ensure that all content—whether sermons, Bible studies, or worship songs—remains consistent with Reformed doctrine. This includes maintaining the centrality of Scripture, avoiding overly sentimental or doctrinally vague teachings, and ensuring that all leaders in online worship are theologically qualified.[75]

In an online environment, where individuals may access teachings from a variety of sources, it is critical for churches to provide sound doctrinal teaching and clear theological guidance. This might include offering resources on Reformed theology, providing theological education for church members, and ensuring that church leaders are equipped to discern and reject teachings that do not align with Scripture.[76] By upholding doctrinal purity in the digital age,[77] churches can protect the integrity of their online worship services and ensure that their ministry remains faithful to Calvin's theological vision.[78]

As the Church adapts to the digital age, applying John Calvin's theology to online worship provides practical guidelines for maintaining doctrinal integrity and fostering authentic Christian engagement. By focusing on the centrality of God's presence,

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[74] Samson Obaloluwa Ojo, Ibitayo Johnson Adelaja, Timothy Oladotun Adio, Adebayo Ola Afolaranmi. "Assessing the Impact of Technology on Church Services and Youth Engagement": 58-72; Ernest Nyrako. "The Church, Digital Technology and Media: A Biblical Reflection on Romans 8:19-23". *Journal of Education and Learning Technology (JELT)* 4, no. 1 (2023): 1-11. https://doi.org/10.38159/jelt.2023411.

[75] John T. McNeill, *The Theology of John Calvin*, 381-382.

[76] August E. Grant, Amanda F. C. Sturgill, Chiung Hwang Chen, and Daniel A. Stout (ed.). *Religion Online: How Digital Technology Is Changing the Way We Worship and Pray*; Julia Müller and Thomas N. Friemel. 2024. "Dynamics of Digital Media Use in Religious Communities—A Theoretical Model" *Religions* 15, no. 7 (2024): 762. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15070762.

[77] Alexander Chow. "What Has Jerusalem to Do with the Internet? World Christianity and Digital Culture": 23-31.

[78] Willem H. Oliver. "From in-person to online worship": a2404; Ochenia Faith Opade. "Perspectives on Digital Evangelism: Exploring the Intersection of Technology and Faith": 15-24.

emphasizing the role of Scripture, fostering community, and carefully administering the sacraments, churches can ensure that their online worship services remain faithful to the core tenets of Calvin's thought. While online worship cannot fully replicate the experience of gathering together physically, it provides opportunities for the Church to expand its reach and continue nurturing the spiritual growth of believers. By adhering to these practical guidelines, churches can navigate the complexities of digital worship while remaining faithful to their theological convictions.

**CONCLUSION**

This article highlights the importance of applying John Calvin's theology in the context of online worship, a practice that has become increasingly relevant in today's digital age. Focusing on Calvin's core theological principles—particularly the presence of God, the role of Scripture, the Church as the body of Christ, and the administration of the sacraments—the article provides practical guidelines for churches striving to maintain theological integrity in online worship. In Calvin's theology, worship is a meeting with God that involves the community of believers. Although online worship presents challenges such as the loss of physical presence and dependence on technology, there are still opportunities to preserve the essence of worship if done with care. The proposed guidelines emphasize the real presence of God through prayer, the reading of Scripture, and faithful teaching of the Word, as well as the importance of maintaining community among believers even in a digital format.

On the other hand, the article also points out that the administration of sacraments, such as the Lord's Supper, in online worship presents a challenge that cannot be overlooked. In Calvin's theology, sacraments are essential means of grace and can only be properly administered within the physical fellowship of the church. Nevertheless, churches can continue to provide in-depth teaching and theological reflection that strengthens the faith of the congregation during periods when physical gathering is not possible. Finally, the article underscores that while online worship cannot fully replace the experience of gathered worship in person, it can still be an effective means to extend the church's reach and support the spiritual growth of believers, provided it is conducted with a strong theological foundation and a commitment to doctrinal integrity. In this way, churches can remain relevant and faithful to their calling to worship and serve, both in the physical and digital worlds.

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