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Reconstructing the Doctrine of the Church amid Digital Transformation: A Systematic-Theological Approach to Esse Ecclesiae and Forma Ecclesiae

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Abstract: ***Digital transformation raises a doctrinal question: how should the church understand its identity, communion, embodied life, sacraments, and mission when its practices are mediated by digital technologies? This article develops a systematic-theological framework for evaluating digital ecclesial practices by bringing selected biblical texts into dialogue with classical ecclesiology and recent research on digital church. Through critical library research, contextual biblical interpretation, and comparative doctrinal analysis, it argues that digital technologies may reshape the forma ecclesiae but cannot independently determine the esse ecclesiae. The article's distinctive contribution is to operationalize this distinction through five interrelated criteria- Christological, pneumatological, communal, sacramental-liturgical, and missional-ethical- and to show how they can diagnose concrete digital practices rather than merely describe technological change. These criteria are applied to livestreamed worship, online participation and pastoral interaction, sacramental questions, and digital accessibility. The framework neither rejects digital mediation in advance nor treats connectivity as equivalent to ecclesial communion; instead, it provides a theological basis for discerning when changing forms serve, strain, or contradict the church's confessed identity and mission.***

Keywords: body of Christ; digital ecclesiology; ecclesial identity; ecclesiology; forma ecclesiae; systematic theology

1. Introduction

Digital transformation is not merely a change in the medium through which the church communicates; it challenges how the church understands its own existence. When the proclamation of the Word, worship, pastoral care, faith formation, and fellowship are mediated by digital platforms, the fundamental question is not simply whether the technology is effective, but whether these new forms disclose and serve the church's identity in accordance with biblical witness and Christian doctrine. Digitalization must therefore be treated as a problem for systematic theology: how does the church remain the church when its historical forms and spaces of participation change? Research in digital ecclesiology has increasingly examined how digital media affect the church's identity, mission, communal relationships, and worship. Campbell and DeLashmutt investigate the relationship between the technological features of multisite worship and the wider, offline worshipping community to which it is connected, demonstrating the importance of studying technology in relation to ecclesial life rather than as an isolated medium.[1] Jung addresses the theological question of whether digital gatherings should be understood as an "online church" or as "church online," arguing that questions concerning worship, communal gathering, and the sacraments remain central to evaluating digitally mediated ecclesial practices. [2] From a Reformed theological perspective, Ndereba examines the opportunities and challenges of digital ministry among Africa's digital natives, highlighting its potential to strengthen the church's missional outreach while raising questions about ecclesial identity, authority, and community.[3] Amenyedzi, meanwhile, demonstrates that the exclusion experienced by persons with disabilities in conventional church life can also be reproduced in digital spaces when accessibility is insufficiently considered. [4] Building on these contributions, this article proposes a constructive methodological framework that uses the distinction between esse ecclesiae (the being or essential identity of the church) and forma ecclesiae (the church's historical and practical forms) as a basis for evaluating digital ecclesial practices. Its contribution does not lie in claiming to originate this distinction, but in operationalizing it through five interrelated theological criteria: Christology, pneumatology, communion, sacramental-liturgical practice, and mission. These criteria are proposed as a framework for discerning whether particular digital forms of worship and ministry adequately express the church's theological identity and vocation.

I argue that the distinction between esse ecclesiae and forma ecclesiae can serve as a systematic-theological diagnostic: it distinguishes the church's identity, grounded in God's work, from the historical forms through which the church lives out its calling. This is not a separation between a spiritual essence and disposable practices. Ecclesial forms shape who can participate, whose voices are heard, how authority is

[1] Heidi A. Campbell and Michael W. DeLashmutt, "Studying Technology and Ecclesiology in Online Multi-Site Worship," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 29, no. 2 (2014): 267–285, https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2014.903662.
[2] Daekyung Jung, "Church in the Digital Age: From Online Church to Church-Online," *Theology and Science* 21, no. 4 (2023): 781–805, https://doi.org/10.1080/14746700.2023.2255956.
[3] K. M. Ndereba, "Digital Ecclesiology and Africa's Digital Natives: Prospects and Challenges," *Acta Theologica* 43, no. 1 (2023): 98–111, https://doi.org/10.38140/at.v43i1.6195.
[4] Seyram B. Amenyedzi, "Disability and Digital Ecclesiology: Towards an Accessible Online Church," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 80, no. 1 (2024): a9599, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v80i1.9599.

exercised, and whether worship is connected to mutual care. The article therefore develops five criteria for examining whether a digital form serves or strains the church's confessed identity. This contribution is deliberately limited: it does not claim that the distinction is new or that one framework can settle every denominational dispute. Rather, it offers a structured way to make the theological reasoning behind digital decisions explicit.

The study uses critical library research and constructive systematic-theological analysis. The primary interpretive materials are Ephesians 1:22–23, 1 Corinthians 12:12–27, Acts 2:42–47, John 20:21–22, Matthew 28:18–20, 1 Peter 2:9–10, and Hebrews 10:24–25. Each passage is read in its literary and canonical context; its theological function is then compared with systematic ecclesiology, ecumenical documents, and scholarly studies of digital church. The analysis proceeds in three steps: identifying doctrinal claims in the biblical texts, clarifying the distinction between ecclesial identity and historical form, and applying the resulting criteria to selected digital practices. The study is conceptual rather than empirical: it does not measure user experience, platform outcomes, or the prevalence of particular practices. Its conclusions should therefore be understood as a theological evaluative proposal, not as an empirically validated model. The source base is primarily anglophone and draws on selected ecumenical, Protestant, and digital-theology scholarship; it does not provide a comprehensive comparison of all Christian traditions or regional digital practices. The framework should therefore be tested and refined through empirical studies and tradition-specific theological analysis.

Biblical Foundations and the Construction of the Doctrine of the Church

The Church as the Body of Christ: Ephesians 1:22–23 and 1 Corinthians 12:12–27

Ephesians 1:22–23 places the church in a Christological relationship: all things are placed under Christ, and Christ is given as head over all things for the church, which is described as his body. Theologically, this image cannot be reduced to the claim that the church is simply a group of individuals who share similar goals. The church's identity derives from its relationship with Christ; the church does not establish itself as the center and ultimate measure of its own existence. Thus, in a digital context, the church's success cannot be measured solely by reach, follower counts, or interaction, since these indicators do not in themselves show whether communal life is directed toward Christ and shaped by the gospel.[5]

In 1 Corinthians 12:12–27, Paul develops the body metaphor to explain a unity that does not erase the diversity of its members. The passage addresses relationships, interdependence, honor, and vulnerability within the community. Its application to digital church must be analogical rather than treating the body metaphor as a literal description of technology. Platforms can help members communicate and participate, but connectivity does not automatically create mutual responsibility. A digital church must demonstrate that weaker members are not neglected, that diverse gifts are valued, and that relationships do not end with content consumption. The body metaphor thus functions as a normative criterion for evaluating the quality of technology-mediated community.

This Christological reading accords with an ecclesiological approach that does not separate the church from the work of the triune God. The World Council of Churches' Faith and Order document connects the church's identity with the life of God, the mission of Christ, the work of the Spirit, communion, ministry, and witness to the world. The document does not replace biblical interpretation or the confessions of any particular tradition, but it provides an ecumenical point of dialogue concerning the elements that shape an understanding of the church. In this article, biblical witness remains the normative foundation; systematic models and ecumenical documents are used to clarify its doctrinal implications.

The Church as a Community Formed by the Word and Practice: Acts 2:42–47

Acts 2:42–47 depicts the life of the community through devotion to the apostles' teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, prayer, care for material needs, and a shared life that generates public witness. This narrative should not be treated as a technical blueprint in which every organizational detail must be copied without regard to genre and historical context. Nevertheless, the text offers a canonical picture of church life that consists not only of communicating teaching but also of worship, relationships, sharing resources, and witness. A widely accessible sermon broadcast remains a limited form of participation if it is not connected to formation, communal prayer, pastoral accompaniment, acts of love, and communal responsibility.

From the perspective of systematic theology, communion is more than a feeling of social closeness. Koinonia refers to participation in a life shaped by God and embodied in concrete practices. Avery Dulles reminds us that the various models of the church- the institution, mystical communion, sacrament, herald, servant, and community of disciples- each highlight a different dimension. None should be treated as the church's sole defining image. In evaluating digital practices, this plurality of models guards against two reductions: the church is not merely a physical institution, but neither is it simply a loose communications network.[6]

The Church Sent into the World and Made Alive by the Spirit: John 20:21–22, Matthew 28:18–20, and 1 Peter 2:9–10

In John 20:21–22, the sending of the disciples is linked to Jesus' being sent by the Father and to the gift of the Holy Spirit. This relationship shows that the church's mission cannot be understood merely as a strategy for organizational expansion; mission is rooted in God's action and carried out in dependence on the Spirit. Matthew 28:18–20 emphasizes making disciples, baptism, and teaching them to observe everything Jesus commanded. Meanwhile, 1 Peter 2:9–10

[5]World Council of Churches, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2013).

[6]Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*, expanded ed. (New York: Image Books, 2002).

describes the people as a chosen race and royal priesthood called to proclaim God's mighty acts. Taken together, these texts direct the church toward an identity it receives and a calling it enacts, rather than an identity determined by devices or platforms.

Digital technology can serve as a means of witness, faith education, diaconal coordination, and pastoral accompaniment across distances. Digital mission, however, must not be equated with the distribution of messages alone. If discipleship in Matthew 28 includes baptism and teaching people to live according to Jesus' teaching, digital ministry must attend to the process of faith formation and involvement in community, not merely the transmission of information. Studies of the relationship between the body of Christ and mission likewise affirm that witness and the formation of members are interconnected; mission cannot be separated from the community's growth and maturity.[7]

Within a systematic-theological framework, ecclesiology connects God's work, the identity of God's people, forms of ministry, and the church's calling in the world. Classical Reformed theology distinguishes the church as organism from the church as institution without separating the two; missional approaches likewise consider the church in relation to the mission of God. Both perspectives help explain why digital forms cannot be evaluated solely on the basis of technology, but must be assessed in relation to the church's identity and calling.

The Distinction between Esse Ecclesiae and Forma Ecclesiae in Systematic Theology

Esse Ecclesiae: An Identity Received, Not Created by Technology

In this article, esse ecclesiae is used as an analytical term for the nature of the church as grounded in God's work: the church is called through the Word, united with Christ, given life by the Spirit, and sent to bear witness. The term is not treated as a technical formula used uniformly across all Christian traditions, but as a working distinction that assists doctrinal analysis. This clarification avoids the assumption that the church possesses a nature detached from history. The church's theological identity becomes visible in concrete life, yet cannot be reduced to any particular social or technological form.

This approach has important consequences for systematic theology. The church is not primarily the product of human efforts to build a community; it is a community that receives its identity and calling in relationship with God. At the same time, this identity does not exempt the church from evaluating its structures and practices. An unjust organizational form, communication that excludes certain groups, or technology that turns believers into passive consumers may contradict the identity the church professes. Esse ecclesiae is therefore not a reason to preserve every historical custom; it provides a normative basis for criticizing customs when a form no longer serves the church's calling.

Forma Ecclesiae: Historical Forms with Theological Consequences

Forma ecclesiae refers to the historical forms and practices through which the church organizes its common life: liturgical arrangements, leadership structures, meeting spaces, patterns of formation, communication media, and forms of ministry. These forms are not neutral. Camera angles, the way moderators manage conversations, the design of comment sections, and decisions about whether worship will be interactive all influence who is seen and heard. Campbell and DeLashmutt show that technology and multisite worship traditions shape one another, while Campbell and Garner explain the reciprocal interaction between digital culture and religious practice.[8]

The esse–forma distinction is not an opposition between the spiritual and the material. Form is a medium that can either support or hinder the expression of the church's identity. Face-to-face forms are not automatically faithful to the gospel, just as digital forms are not automatically superficial. What must be examined is the relationship among form, doctrine, and the fruits of practice. Ndereba's study shows that digital ministry can extend the reach of mission while also raising challenges for identity, authority, and community. This finding reinforces the need for critical theological evaluation rather than an absolute acceptance or rejection of technology.

Presence, Sacraments, and the Limits of Digital Mediation

Presence Is Not the Same as Technical Connectivity

Digital church is often evaluated in terms of people's ability to see, hear, and respond to one another through screens. Technical connectivity, however, demonstrates only that a channel of communication exists; it does not prove that participants know one another, are accountable to one another, or are involved in communal life. Jung argues that questions concerning online church should be examined in light of a theocentric orientation, the depth of worship participation, encounters among members, and sacramental questions. Cooper and colleagues likewise invite readers to reconsider the relationship between social, digital, and physical presence without reducing it to a binary choice.[9]

Hebrews 10:24–25 links the gathering of believers with the call to attend to one another, stir up love and good works, and encourage one another. The text does not directly resolve every contemporary technological question, so it should not be used as an automatic prohibition of all online worship. It nevertheless offers a relevant theological orientation: ecclesial gathering is directed toward mutual responsibility and perseverance. Online practices should therefore be designed not to stop at sermon consumption, but to facilitate follow-up, prayer, encouragement, and involvement in ministry.

[7]Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989).
[8]Heidi A. Campbell and Stephen Garner, *Networked Theology: Negotiating Faith in Digital Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016).
[9]Anthony-Paul Cooper et al., "The Reconfiguration of Social, Digital and Physical Presence: From Online Church to Church Online," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 77, no. 3 (2021): a6286, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i3.6286.

Sacraments, the Body, and Materiality

Questions concerning the sacraments show why digital forms cannot be evaluated solely by reach or convenience. Baptism and the Lord's Supper have meanings bound up with the Word, the body, material elements, ecclesial action, and the confessional commitments of particular traditions. Teresa Berger discusses liturgy in digital worlds with attention to the body, participation, presence, and materiality. [10] Ryan Turnbull specifically examines the theological grammar of cyber-Eucharist and the concept of presence in online celebrations. These studies do not yield a universal answer for every denomination, but they show that sacramental decisions require explicit doctrinal argument.[11]

Because Christian traditions differ in their understandings of the sacraments and ecclesial authority, this article does not conclude that all online sacramental celebrations are universally valid or invalid. The more responsible conclusion is that churches must evaluate such practices in light of their confessions, church order, theology of presence, the role of ministers, material elements, and understanding of congregational participation. A distinction must be maintained among worship broadcasts, participation in mediated worship, and the online administration of sacraments, so that practical decisions do not precede theological reasoning.

Equitable Access, Vulnerable Bodies, and the Church's Mission

A theology of the body of Christ requires the church to attend to members who are easily overlooked. In digital contexts, barriers may arise from internet connectivity, device costs, digital literacy, language, age, sensory disabilities, and socioeconomic circumstances. Amenyedzi's research shows that the exclusion of people with disabilities can persist in virtual spaces when accessibility is not considered from the outset. Blackmer also connects digital worship with social inclusion and cohesion, demonstrating that evaluation cannot rely on technical metrics alone. Equitable access is not an operational add-on; it follows from the confession that the church is a body whose members need one another.[12]

The Dicastery for Communication's document Towards Full Presence emphasizes responsible human engagement on social media. In church contexts, this principle can be applied to privacy protection, pastoral communication, moderation of digital spaces, prevention of abuse, and follow-up with people who contact the church. Technology should strengthen ministries of love and witness rather than turn believers into statistics or ministry into a competition for popularity.[13]

Synthesis: Systematic-Theological Criteria for Evaluating Digital Church

On the basis of biblical interpretation and dialogue with systematic-theological literature, I propose five interrelated criteria. The Christological criterion asks whether digital practice is centered on Christ and the gospel. The pneumatological criterion asks whether it makes room for the formation of a community that lives through gifts, witness, and service, rather than treating technology as the source of ecclesial life. The communal criterion asks whether participation generates mutual responsibility, care for vulnerable members, and practices of mutual encouragement. The sacramental-liturgical criterion requires consistency with the theology and church order of the relevant tradition. The missional-ethical criterion asks whether digital forms extend witness and service while safeguarding human dignity, privacy, and equitable access.[14]

These criteria are not an algorithm that replaces ecclesial discernment. Their purpose is to ensure that decisions about technology are explained through theological argument rather than generational preference, situational pressure, or marketing logic alone. The same platform may be used by different churches with different ecclesiological outcomes, depending on the design of participation, structures of accountability, theology of worship, and relationships with ministry beyond the network. The central question is not whether digital technology is abstractly good or bad, but whether a particular use accords with the church's identity, practices, and calling.

In practical terms, churches should connect online ministry with faith formation, accessible fellowship, diakonia, pastoral accompaniment, and responsible data governance. Evaluation should not stop at viewer counts or engagement metrics; it should examine whether relationships continue beyond the broadcast, whether vulnerable members can participate, whether pastoral follow-up occurs, and whether digital activity leads to service and witness. The esse–forma distinction becomes useful precisely here: it asks not whether a platform is modern or popular, but what kind of ecclesial life its design enables and what forms of exclusion or passivity it may normalize.

Applying the Five Criteria to Concrete Digital Practices

Consider first a livestreamed worship service that allows remote participation but offers no way for participants to be known, followed up, or included in congregational care. The Christological criterion asks whether the service remains oriented to the gospel rather than performance metrics; the pneumatological criterion asks whether it nurtures gifts and service rather than passive consumption; and the communal criterion asks whether viewers are incorporated into reciprocal relationships. The stream may be a valuable form of access, but by itself it does not demonstrate the fullness of ecclesial communion. A practical response would connect the broadcast to small groups, prayer, pastoral contact, and

[10]Teresa Berger, *@Worship: Liturgical Practices in Digital Worlds* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018).
[11]Ryan Turnbull, "Clarifying the Grammar of Cyber-Eucharist: An Inquiry into 'Presence' as a Condition for Online Celebrations of the Eucharist," *Didaskalia* 29, no. 1 (2021): 40–57.
[12]Seyram B. Amenyedzi, "Disability and Digital Ecclesiology," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 80, no. 1 (2024): a9599, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v80i1.9599.
[13]Dicastery for Communication, *Towards Full Presence: A Pastoral Reflection on Engagement with Social Media* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2023).
[14]Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*, expanded ed. (New York: Image Books, 2002); World Council of Churches, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2013).

opportunities to serve, while avoiding the assumption that every viewer must participate in the same way.[15]

A second case concerns an online Lord's Supper or Eucharist. The sacramental-liturgical criterion prevents convenience from deciding the question in advance. A church must ask how its confession understands the material elements, the minister's role, the gathered body, and the relation between mediated participation and sacramental action. Because Christian traditions differ, this framework does not pronounce a universal verdict. It requires each church to make its reasoning explicit and consistent with its own doctrine and polity, rather than treating technical feasibility as theological authorization.[16]

A third case concerns a digital ministry that reaches a wide audience but excludes people with disabilities, older members with limited digital literacy, or households without reliable internet. The missional-ethical and communal criteria reveal that reach and inclusion are not identical. If access depends on resources that some members lack, a ministry may expand numerically while narrowing participation. Possible remedies include captions, screen-reader-compatible materials, low-bandwidth options, telephone access, language support, and non-digital alternatives. These measures are not merely technical accommodations; they express the theological claim that the body's members are mutually necessary and that mission must not erase the vulnerable.[17]

These examples show how the five criteria function together. No single criterion is sufficient: a Christologically framed broadcast can still exclude people; a highly interactive platform can lack sacramental coherence; and a technically accessible service can fail to foster discipleship or service. The framework therefore works as a set of mutually corrective questions, not as a scoring system or a substitute for denominational discernment. Its practical value is to make theological reasons, foreseeable exclusions, and accountability for decisions visible.

2. Conclusion

A systematic-theological approach shows that digital transformation must be evaluated in relation to the church's nature, grounded in God's work, and the historical forms through which the church lives out its calling. The biblical images of the body of Christ, communion, sending, and mutual encouragement do not prescribe a single technological arrangement; they provide theological criteria for discerning whether digital practices serve or diminish ecclesial life. The article's contribution is to operationalize the distinction between esse ecclesiae and forma ecclesiae through five interrelated criteria: Christological, pneumatological, communal, sacramental-liturgical, and missional-ethical. Applied to livestreamed worship, online sacramental questions, and digital accessibility, these criteria show why connectivity, reach, and convenience cannot alone establish ecclesial faithfulness.

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