



March 4, 2021

What is *church*? Many of us have been told we can worship God anywhere and at any time; Jesus says as much in John 4:21. Indeed, for the Christian all of life is worship:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:1-2)

But is it possible to “have church” anywhere? Even before the advent of the novel Coronavirus pandemic, many religious communities invited people to stay home and join their “online campus.” In the time of Coronavirus even more people have gone to “online-only.”

In our own denomination there are still Sessions who have decided it is not worth the risk to gather for the public worship of God. But is “Zoom Worship” properly speaking, biblically speaking, *church*?

I. The Meaning of “Church”

The Greek word (*ekklesia*) translated *church* is not a special word in the New Testament. It simply means *assembly*. Sometimes it refers to the gathering of God’s people for the purpose of sacred ministry (e.g. Matt 18:17, Acts 14:23) and other times it refers to a secular gathering to conduct city business (Acts 19:32). But one thing is clear, whether it is used in its secular or sacred sense: it refers to a gathering.

The word used to describe God’s people makes it clear gathering, assembling, and meeting together are vital aspects not only of our identity, but also of our holy functioning as God’s people:

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. (Hebrews 10:24-25)

As Christians, the gathering together with the saints to worship our God is not only vitally important for our spiritual health, but also our own identity as members of Christ’s body. That is why, when Session suspended public worship service last Spring and for two weeks in November, we were careful not to call the livestream services, “worship services” because they were not services of corporate worship.

Instead our goal with those services was to supplement family and household worship, because a livestream cannot replace or substitute for the corporate worship of the church.

II. Safety Considerations

A. Human Life is Precious

As Christians we believe human life is precious, has dignity, and is worthy of protection. But our commitment to preserve human life and dignity does not mean a Christian worldview teaches Christians should never risk their lives for the sake of others or for the sake of gospel witness and service. In ancient times of plague wealthy pagans - fearing for their lives - fled the cities for the safety of country estates, but Christians remained and cared for the abandoned, the sick, and the dying. Their Christian worldview compelled them to serve neighbors in need; they did not view their unbelieving neighbors as merely risks of exposure, but instead they willingly ministered despite the risks.

Through plagues of old, the saints testified to their faith in God as they boldly loved and served those made in His image. In this they adorned the profession of the gospel and aided many in coming to Christ. But they also took care and used wisdom as they continued to serve their neighbors because of the love Christians have for all people made in God’s image.

B. Christians and Medical Advice

Our biblical commitment to the dignity and value of human life means we do embrace medical and scientific advice as worthy of consideration. When this new virus made its way from Wuhan to Chattanooga, the Session of FPFO determined to take precautions and temporarily suspended public worship, because we were led to believe there was extraordinarily great risk to human life. In that time, your Session along with the Chairman of the Diaconate talked frequently to discuss the best scientific and medical data available in order to protect the lives of Christ’s people here.

In that time, we frequently looked to the CDC for guidance on how to prevent the spread of disease in our midst. The first priority of the CDC and other governmental authorities seems to be to preserve life. So there is a great deal of overlap between the concerns of science and the concerns of Christ's people. But we must also recognize we cannot merely look to the CDC or Governor Kemp to tell us how to worship or when it is "safe" or acceptable to do so, because Christians have priorities different than that of the Governor or CDC. The first priority of a Christian Worldview has never been to preserve life.

C. Differing Priorities

As Christians, the preservation of life is not our first priority. If merely preserving life were the chief goal, the Apostle Paul would have given up his ministry after the first time he was beaten and left for dead. But he pressed on because His goal was not to preserve his own beating heart, but to see lives saved. In contrast, the goal of the medical community and government is the bare preservation of beating hearts and respiring lungs; as such they urged and advised (and in the case of some demographics, *continue* to urge) people to stay in their homes lest they contract a disease and die.

But for Christians, our primary goal is quite different; our growth in holiness to the praise and glory of God is more important than life:

So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory. Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you. So I will bless you as long as I live; in your name I will lift up my hands. (Psalm 63:2-4)

The chief means of our growth in holiness is the gathering of the saints for corporate worship in word and sacrament to the praise of God's glorious grace. The Apostles emphasized this frequently in their letters to the "church," that is the *assembly* of the saints.

Christians certainly do not reject science or shun all caution, and we greatly value the input of the medical community in our lives. However we assess everything in light of our Christian worldview and holy priorities. This means we must practice discernment (see Rom. 12:1-2) regarding the advice of governmental and public health officials at all times (not just during a pandemic).

D. The Reality of Death

As Christians, we understand no lives will be saved through any amount of medical or scientific intervention and prevention. The great 20th Century pastor Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones was a brilliant young physician in London, even working as assistant to the Royal Physician; his practice of medicine brought him into contact with the highest echelons of English society. But regardless of his skill as a physician, he was deeply burdened because his aristocratic patients might be cured of a physical ailment, but they would still perish all the same. While not at all asserting that medical science was unimportant or frivolous, Lloyd-Jones yearned to see lives being *saved* and not simply *prolonged*.

The truth Lloyd-Jones recognized has long been suppressed by the modern man: death is unavoidable. Prior to 2020, the modern man had pushed the concept of death to the very edge of his consciousness such that death scarcely crossed the minds of many. But all that changed with Covid.

Now modern society is confronted with the eternal realities and - like worms caught on the sidewalk under the blazing sun - is writhing around desperately trying to numb the frightening reality of death. What we sang last month in evening worship has become woefully apparent to the modern man, and he does not know what to do with it: all men by nature are "bound for destruction and doomed to die."

But as Christians, we alone have found safety. For all the valiant efforts of the medical community, it has not saved a single life over the past year. Christ alone - not masks, not Remdesivir, not vaccines - has the power to save lives and rescue from the grave.

When we come to understand this our priorities fall into a proper place, and we burn with a desire to worship our Saviour with the company of folk whom He has saved by His death. For Christians, our personal safety is not our first priority, but the worship of Him who loved us and gave Himself for us.

III. The Danger of Absence

A. Risk Assessment in All of Life

Because our goals are different from the CDC or Governor Kemp, we will respond differently to the same risks. Because we are always at risk, all of life is risk-assessment. For example, when I drive to church on the

Lord's Day morning, I frequently see deer crossing the road. While I try to mitigate some of that risk by paying extra attention, some risk of death remains. But gathering for worship is worth the risk.

Similarly, last week we were praying as a congregation for the church in Pakistan. Our brethren there face regular death threats in that country. The mere act of gathering for corporate worship on a Lord's Day exposes the saints to relatively high risk of death or injury. But that does not stop them from worshiping; they have determined gathering with God's people is worth even high risk of death and injury.

In the current public health situation, we have been forced to evaluate our risks. And those risks have been changing as additional information becomes available along with new treatments. This last year has made us aware of more risks and forced us to determine our own risk tolerance, which is something we had always done without realizing it "Before Covid."

I want to encourage you to solemnly evaluate your risk assessment and risk tolerance to consider whether they are in line with Christian values and Christian duty. We have always done this. Previously we had to ask ourselves: is worship worth the risk of contracting a cold, pinkeye, or the flu.

In this age of Covid, in which public health officials are frequently encouraging wide swathes of society to stay home because if people venture out, they *might* contract a disease and they *might* be hospitalized and they *might* even die, we are constantly confronted with the risk of Covid. But should Covid be the risk that is forefront in our minds or is there a more excellent way for Christians?

B. Risk to Spiritual Health

I want to impress upon your soul another risk: what is the risk to your soul's peace and joy, your growth in holiness, your faith and assurance of salvation from a long-term absence from corporate worship? Is that risk greater than the risk of death? And is the benefit of public worship worth the risk of death? I suggest there is a small risk of death from Covid, but a great risk of spiritual harm due to not gathering for worship.

When the Old Testament saints of God were cut off from public worship because of war or clear, specific, and personal threats to their lives, they cried out to God not merely to save their lives, but to restore them to the *public* and *corporate* worship of God:

These things I remember, as I pour out my soul: how I would go with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God with glad shouts and songs of praise, a multitude keeping festival. Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God. (Psalm 42:4-6)

Did you notice how it's not only God whom the psalmist misses, but the presence of God *in the midst* of His people? Public worship is a joy because of God's presence *with* His saints.

Indeed there are seasons of life in which we are kept from the assembly of God's people: when we are sick or have been exposed to sickness, when our enemies have targeted us and are personally hunting us down, etc. Despite those circumstances, the saints enduring such hardships typically found (and find!) ways to gather physically with some of the body of Christ. Our brethren on mainland China, for example, continue to meet in homes and secret places regardless of the danger of death and widespread surveillance. And they do so because God is worthy of their worship and God is worth the risk.

IV. Corporate Worship is Paramount

A. The Worth of God

When we gather for public worship on a Lord's Day morning and Lord's Day evening we are - among other things - declaring the worth and value with which we esteem God. In "normal" times when we gathered for worship, we were declaring God is more worthy of our time than anything else: more important than sports, streaming, or even sleep! That is still true; Covid has not changed God's worth.

As we gather for worship now, the world "with a scornful wonder," scoffs at our gathering together to confess our sin and confess our faith, scoffs at our embracing one another in love, scoffs at our singing praises to God. Yet despite the scoffers, our gatherings declare our God is worthy of worship even now and worthy of us subjecting ourselves - and one another - to increased risk. Session has, however, gone to great lengths to try to mitigate risks for folks who are more vulnerable to respiratory infections.

The 9:15 a.m. morning worship service is "masks required" with social distancing winsomely enforced as we express together the delight we have in our Saviour's love for us. For those who have considered the

recommendations of the CDC and come to an alternative course of action and comfort level regarding fellowship and gathering with the “household of faith,” the 10:45 morning worship and evening worship services continue to provide a time for the saints to come together and express their joy in Christ with greater nearness (I Pt. 5:14, Rom. 16:16, Acts 20:37, 2 Cor. 13:12, etc.).

B. The Promise of God

Worship is all about God - He is the audience, He is the one Who is to be pleased by worship - but God is so good and kind that He blesses us in worship in a unique way when we gather for worship.

The Scripture tells us God is “enthroned” on the praises of the saints (Psa. 22:3); God tells us He gives blessings of encouragement, edification, and comfort for His saints through the preaching (I Cor. 14:3) when we “come together” (I Cor. 14:26) that are not to be had simply by listening to a sermon or watching a worship service. The sacraments are also a means of grace used by God’s Spirit to bless the saints as we come together; we see in the broken bread and poured out wine the emblems of Christ’s suffering in our place and are assured not only of Christ’s death to satisfy all God’s wrath against us but also His return to take us to be with Him where He is (I Cor. 11:26).

If you’re not gathering with us on the Lord’s Days, I want to again encourage you to consider whether gathering for the corporate worship of God is worth the risk to you. But I also encourage you to consider the spiritual harm resulting from not gathering regularly with the saints for worship.

For those of you staying home because of health concerns: please solemnly consider the wisdom of continuing to be absent from corporate worship especially given the advances in treatment and prevention measures underway. But also remember: as Christians, physical safety is not our first concern; we worship Him because our Father has called us to do so, not because it is physically “safe” to do so.

For others who may have grown accustomed to simply watch the livestream because of the convenience, I urge you to seriously consider what you are missing by not being present with the saints as we worship. But please also consider what your prolonged absence may suggest about how you value God’s worship.

C. Unity and Love

Although now we are separated in worship services with different protocols regarding health precautions, we must nonetheless cultivate love for one another in our hearts and nourish the desire to return to *one* morning service and visibly manifest that we are the *one* congregation of FPFO. For that reason, I urge all of us to mortify (kill!) presumptions and suspicion about those who have considered the public health warnings and our varied circumstances and come to different conclusions. We must not allow the devil to use Covid as a wedge to kill our love.

For those who choose to wear a mask, I hope you will not assume those who do not wear masks are unconcerned for your health or don’t love you, but rather assume they have sincere spiritual and/or physiological reasons not to do so. Likewise, those who choose not to wear a mask, please don’t assume those who take additional precautions do so out of faithless fear they will die before God has ordained.

We must recognize there will be a diversity of responses based on an individual’s circumstances, and we must not presume our brother or sister is in sin simply because she or he has a different outlook than we ourselves do. Let us live anticipating heaven, not fixated on what our brethren are wearing or not wearing, but instead strive now to grow in love for them as we eagerly await worshipping together again.

In a sense, the threat of death is far from over (see I Cor. 15:26, Rev. 21:4), but as we gather for public worship we celebrate the life we have that is hidden with God in Christ. I look forward to worshipping and praising God again with you this Lord’s Day as we come together in His presence and in the assembly of His godly ones (Psa. 149) knowing the grave cannot hold us because it could not hold Him who is our Head.

Your pastor,



Ryan Biese