



# FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (PCA)

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March 20, 2020

Greetings to the Beloved of God in Christ Jesus,

I sorely missed worshiping with you this past Lord's Day, and I am grateful to the many of you who were able to "tune in" to the livestream and offer feedback. It is daunting and difficult to conceive of corporate worship suspended for at least two more weeks. Please check the website for updates regularly, and if you haven't signed up for text message notifications, you can do so by texting *FPFO* to 84576.

How do we live as Christians in a world that is troubled by pandemic, social distancing, and economic upheaval? In one sense, the same as we always have: our Lord the King has said, "...take heart: I have overcome the world." The Lord Jesus Christ reminds us He has overcome every affliction, every adversity, and every enemy of His people including sickness and death. Because Christ has overcome every threat and enemy of His people we live with faithful boldness trusting in God's sovereign care over His people and providential control over the world He made and sustains. What does that look like with particular application to our situation? Let me suggest four areas where faithful living must continue.

## I. God's People Continue to Worship

This week I spent several hours on the phone with many of our church members, and one of the things that most encouraged me was the pervasive desire to return to corporate worship. Even from among those who had recently been feeling less desire to worship corporately...until last week!

To quote one Presbyterian pastor from North Carolina:

*Suspending gathering at church is not a victory for the enemies of Christ. At the cross, Satan, sin and death have all been dealt a death-blow, and none of them win because God's people do not gather for a short time. In fact, we ought to praise the Lord, that he has given us the technological ability and advances which allow us to conduct worship remotely. The Kingdom of Heaven and the church of the Lord Jesus Christ have faced greater rivals than Covid-19 and emerged victorious every time. ([Link](#))*

I would add this: although we are not able to gather for public worship, worship can and must continue in your households and by individuals during this season. This is vital for your own continued spiritual nourishment. Even though we are not gathering together as a congregation for worship, we continue to worship where we are.

## II. God's People Continue to Submit to the Government

Many of us are suspicious of Government or share the Former President's sentiment, "The most terrifying words in the English language are: 'I'm from the government and I'm here to help.'" However, Christians must remember from where the civil government derives its power: neither from the Constitution nor from "the consent of the governed," but from God Himself:

*Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. (Romans 13:1-2)*

God instituted the civil magistrate for the good of mankind and to restrain the effects of the Fall (cf. Gen. 9). As the civil magistrate issues guidelines and/or decrees regarding limits on gatherings, travel, and/or interactions, Christians ought (must!) strive to submit to the civil magistrate here too.

Robert Lewis Dabney, the greatest of all teachers of theology (at least according to Hodge), says about the Christian's duty to obey the government:

*Civil government is an ordinance of God; magistrates rule by His providence and by His command, and are His agents or ministers. Obedience to them, in the Lord, is a religious duty; rebellion against them is not only injustice to our fellowmen, but disobedience to God.*

That is - in part - our reason to suspend corporate worship as a congregation. If the government were to ban Christian gatherings, we would of course obey God rather than man. But the government has limited *all* gatherings of more than ten people because of a public danger. So just as if there were an ice storm and the governor closed the roads, so too in this area we submit to those authorities whom God has placed over us for our good. If we were to disobey government here, we would likewise be disobeying God.

Certainly our government is deeply flawed both in terms of morality and competence, but we must remember what Christ commanded regarding the immoral and incompetent government of Caesar:

*Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. (1 Pt 2:13-15)*

We do not submit to the civil government for its own sake, but for Christ's sake. What poor witness to the gospel it would be if Christians flagrantly disregarded the government's commands and guidance in this area especially. Such an act would be a grave provocation of God's providence and would almost certainly result in the spread of this virus in our own faith communion.

While it grieves all of us to be apart, we do so for the sake of our witness. So let me encourage you - whether you think you are low risk or high risk - practice social distancing, avoid unnecessary trips out, and pay attention to the ongoing guidance issued by the governing authorities.

### III. God's People Continue to Love their Neighbors

Ironically one of the ways we love our neighbors right now is by distancing ourselves from them! This virus, though not highly fatal, is highly contagious and can be very deadly to the aged and those who are already weakened with other conditions. So whether you consider yourself "low risk" or "high risk," please understand we all have the *same* risk of infection and infecting others. This is one of the ways we seek to preserve our own life and the lives of others (as the Sixth Commandment teaches us).

I am saddened by the flippant attitude that many in my generation and younger seem to have regarding this virus. Many misunderstand that a low risk for *complication* does not mean a low risk of infection (and subsequent spreading of the virus to others who are more vulnerable to complications). The facts of the matter remain this new virus is highly infectious, even more so than the common flu. The only way to halt its spread is by limiting its opportunity to do so as was done in South Korea and not done in Italy.

But social distancing does *not* free us from the obligation to serve our neighbors. If you are healthy and young, are there senior citizens or sick folks in your neighborhood for whom you could pick up groceries, medicine, prepare a meal, provide toilet paper, hand sanitizer, or other supplies? If you have more free time on your hands, can you call someone who may live alone or might otherwise be especially lonely in this time and be in need of Christian encouragement?

Additionally, even though we are kept from public worship by the virus, we "continue to support the church in her worship and work to the best of our ability" just as we vowed when we joined the church. As I talked with our members on the phone this week, the economic toll of this virus became apparent as most of our members said their jobs had cut back on hours or eliminated positions entirely. Giving to the church is an expression of both faith and love: faith that God will provide for our needs and it expresses our love for God *and* His people. Our diaconal fund may be put to greater use now than in recent memory. If you would like to mail in a contribution you can do so to PO Box 2055 Fort Oglethorpe, GA 30742.

### IV. God's People Continue to Seek the Means of Grace

God ordinarily makes us to know the benefits of Christ through the "outward and ordinary" means of grace: the Word, Sacraments, and Prayer. All of which converge in public worship, don't they? Yet during this season, we are unable to come to the Lord's Table or public worship. But

simply because we are cut off from public worship and the sacraments, that does *not* mean we are cut off from God.

Please make use of the livestream. It will be available at the normal worship time through the church Facebook page: [facebook.com/FPFOchurch](https://www.facebook.com/FPFOchurch). Remember you do *not* need a Facebook account to view it. Please supplement the livestream with family and household worship. The Service will be available later on our YouTube channel (you can find it by searching on YouTube).

I urge you to continue (and dive deeper) in the Scripture during this season. Additionally, there are a number of websites that offer excellent teaching resources and spiritual encouragement during this time. Here are just a few:

<https://www.gracegems.org> <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/> <https://gospelreformation.net/external-articles/>

<https://heidelblog.net> <https://www.paultripp.com/wednesdays-word>

Please continue to pray! Perhaps you have more free time now? Not surprisingly, shares of Netflix are up 8% as of this writing. I think we know why; many of us have a lot more time on their hands (not all of us, surely, and often not by choice!). But what if those of us with more free time during this time of slowdown spent “just” 15 more minutes each day praying? How might God choose to encourage and bless us through praying more? Here are some suggested things to pray:

***Pray through the Psalms:*** open the psalter and see how many of those verses can you turn into petitions, requests to God? In the psalms we not only find words for prayer, but comfort in the midst of affliction, uncertainty, and even despair.

***Pray for the Church Officers:*** the elders are struggling to know how to shepherd and serve in this time as we try to balance public health and public worship. The deacons will soon have a great many demands made on their own ministries; ask God to enable each of the deacons to strive to be faithful to his ordination vows.

***Pray for Health Care Professionals:*** both those involved in the treatment of the sick and the development of remedies. Thank God there are already existing drugs that show great promise at destroying the virus and additional vaccines are being tested. Ask God to sustain and preserve the overworked as they try to promote healing and provide physical comfort.

***Pray for Government Officials:*** Even though government authority is derived from God, pray the government in this land will not go beyond its Constitutional Authority or seek to usurp the rights of its citizens. Ask God to grant wisdom to those He has placed in authority as they strive to decrease the impact of this virus

***Pray for God's Mercy on the Earth:*** As folks are confronted with the nearness of sickness and death, ask God to send a spirit of repentance to many. Beg God to grant relief from this plague and provide relief from its effects.

Thanks for taking the time to read this letter. I hope you are encouraged in spite of how the news would have us feel. Even though the church building is closed to all but staff and officers, please feel free to call me or any of the officers if you have a need or just need to talk.

I'll leave you with these words from John Newton, *Though troubles assail us and dangers affright, though friends should all fail us and foes all unite, yet one thing secures us whatever betide, the promise assures us, "The Lord will provide"* (Trinity Hymnal No. 95).

Your friend,

**Ryan Biese,**

Pastor