



FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (PCA)

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Greetings to the Saints of God purchased by Christ,

This is now the sixth pastoral letter that I have written you during this time; I have them all saved in a folder on my computer entitled, *plague letters*. God is no doubt teaching His people many things through this time of social distancing, self-quarantine, and economic shutdown. I was reminded by one of our members recently that God teaches and works patience in His people often through adversity.

In these pastoral letters we've considered several things that Christians continue to do even in the midst of a plague and social distancing such as this; Christians continue to worship, to remember the Sabbath day, to serve one another, and so forth. But there are many things Christians cannot continue to do out of concern for the health of our neighbors because of the ease transmitting this disease.

I. Discipline and Judgment

We are not able to gather together for the public worship of God Lord's Day Morning and Evening. We thank God we live in an age in which we are able to meet virtually via livestream in our homes to participate in something of a worship service with our family, but that is only a poor substitute for the gathering of God's people in God's meetinghouse on God's day.

One of the reasons our livestream is a poor substitute for corporate worship is that we are unable to come to the Lord's Table during this season. Faithful Christians throughout history have been kept from the Lord's Table for seasons due to imprisonment, isolation, persecution, plagues, and sundry other reasons that are no fault of their own. But other times, being kept from the Lord's Table is a means of disciplining Christians who fall into sin and encouraging them toward repentance.

There is a sense in which large swathes of the universal church are suspended from the Lord's Table through this providence. God's word reminds us:

For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And "If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?" (1 Peter 4:17-18)

God desires His people to be holy (that's why He calls us *saints* or *holy ones* throughout the Scriptures), so we should not treat lightly our sin and or excuse areas of life where God's holiness is not clearly reflected. Peter reminds us God's judgment brings discipline even to the household of faith. The Apostle Peter confronts us clearly with the reality of divine discipline in the Christian life. But remember and draw encouragement from the outcome of discipline: salvation.

Nonetheless, we would do well to use this time to examine our hearts, homes, lives, and congregation to see whether there are unconfessed sins or sinful patterns that we are coddling instead of killing:

Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. (Jas 5:13-16)

Here the Apostle James reminds us there are sometimes physical and physiological consequences to our spiritual health. James encourages us to use seasons such as this to seek out indwelling sin in ourselves, turn from it, and seek out the mercy God has promised to all who confess their sins.

We should earnestly pray God will remove the threat of this pestilence for many reasons; not least of which is the resumption of worshiping together, serving one another together, and coming to the Lord's Table together.

II. The Lord's Supper is Eaten Together

Because we cannot worship together, Christians cannot observe the Lord's Supper during this pandemic. I have seen a number of faith communities, attempt to offer something they are calling "virtual communion" or "Live Stream Lord's Supper," with folks providing their own bread and wine at home and eating and drinking by following the instructions on screen. But it is impossible to come to communion virtually. Whatever those faith communities are doing, it is not the Lord's Supper.

Those who try to practice virtual communion sometimes defend the practice by arguing along the lines of "The Last Supper was a Passover meal, celebrated in the home and since that's when Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, we can celebrate communion in our homes too" (cf. Matt. 26, etc.). But that misunderstands the nature of sacraments and the nature of the church. Here's a quick article by Scott Swain that looks at some of those things: [LINK](#).

One of the things we see in the New Testament is that although indeed the Lord's Supper was instituted in someone's home as part of a full meal, however the Apostolic Church did not consider it merely a family meal (or even a full meal). In Paul's instructions (rebuke!) to correct some of the dysfunction and abuses in the Corinthian church observance of the Lord's Supper he writes, "*do you not have homes to eat and drink in?*" (I Cor. 11:22). Clearly the communion services to which the Apostles were accustomed was not a full, family meal, but a simple rite of God's people being served bread and wine in the context of a worship service and not in their individual houses.

Paul's instructions are also even more clear that the Lord's Supper can only be observed in the context of gathered, public worship. It's not something done in hotel rooms by families when on vacation or in homes by small groups during a pandemic. At least five times the Apostle uses the expression translated "*when you come together*" (I Cor. 11: 17, 18, 20, 33, 34) as he tries to help the Corinthians (and us!) rightly understand what the Lord's Supper is and when it may be served. Clearly Paul desired the church to commune together and in fact he even instructed the church there to "*wait for one another*" (I Cor. 11:33) so that they could eat and drink together. We should use this time to pray the Lord will again allow us to gather to come to His table together.

Our doctrinal standard, the Westminster Confession of Faith, summarizes the Scriptural teaching on this point by reminding us the bread and wine are not "to go" orders, but part of a public worship service and not for any "who are not then present in the congregation" (WCF 29:3).

The Lord's Supper is for the body of Christ, that is why those who cannot "discern the body" rightly (I Cor 11:29) must not come to the table. The *body* in view is not merely the crucified, risen, and ascended body of Christ, but also the body of Christ that is His church. So the Lord's Supper is not a meal in which we partake apart from the body of Christ (His church), but one for which we wait to eat along with our brethren until we can commune together.

We'll have more to say about the Lord's Supper in coming weeks. Prior to the implementation of widespread social distancing, the Session made a few changes to the way we will observe the Lord's Supper in order to commune together in a way that is more consistent with Jesus' institution of it in the Scripture.

In the meantime, let us not grow weary of pleading with our God to show mercy and again enable us to gather for public worship in Word and Sacrament that we may remember and proclaim His marvelous deeds of grace and faithfulness.

Your friend,



Ryan