



FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (PCA)

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April 24, 2020

With great sadness, Session has extended the closure of the building to May 13, 2020; this is in compliance with Gov. Kemp's declaration of a Public Health Emergency. Session continues to monitor the situation and regularly seeks advice from the President of the Walker-Catoosa-Dade Medical Society regarding re-opening the building, resuming public worship, and restoring regular activities.

In consultation with medical experts, we believe it is necessary to continue to close the building for the duration of what Gov. Kemp has declared a "Public Health Emergency." As you know, mortality rates of Coronavirus cases in those above age 60 are greatly increased as well as for folks of any age who are obese, diabetic, current or former smokers, etc. Additionally, the numbers of new cases each day for Georgia continue to rise, so we believe for the purpose of stewarding our own lives as well as the lives of others, we must follow the directives of the governing authorities and the guidance of public health officials.

Although the building is closed generally, Session has decided that conditions are such that we believe it is not too unwise to allow up to seven people to observe the livestream as well as sing, pray, and confess along with the liturgy. If you would like to participate in this way, please email me or call the church office so we can work out a schedule. In accordance with public health guidelines and state mandates, social distancing must still be strictly observed by those who are not members of the same household.

I. Living Faithfully with the Available Data

Session has had to wrestle with how to respond to this pandemic, and it may seem strange to completely halt the public worship of God simply because of a little sickness; after all, as some people say, 'we don't shut things down every flu season.' Those are reasonable concerns.

As we have tried to navigate this circumstance, we've come to understand that - according to the the medical data currently available - this virus is fundamentally different from the seasonal flu. The Governor has declared us to be in a public health emergency for the time being, so this is a situation fundamentally unlike cold and flu season, which means our response and duties will be profoundly different as well.

As I'm writing this, there is very encouraging news coming out of both New York and California regarding antibody rates that *may* indicate the Coronavirus infections were far more widespread than previously thought, which *may* mean the Coronavirus is far less deadly and far less severe than previously thought. But it's simply too early for our rulers to know how to apply these data to formulate public policy and likewise for us your elders.

I sincerely hope these antibody studies prove we were wrong to suspend worship and that we can very quickly resume church life (and much more beside)! But until there is further analysis of these (and other) studies), we cannot in good conscience open the building. We, as your elders, are very capable of making errors in our judgments, but we must make judgments based on the finite data that are available to us right now, and trust that God's mercy is sufficient for us as we seek to be faithful to Him.

II. Quarantine and God's People

While we are in times that are unprecedented in our lifetimes, we've talked before about how the Church overcame similar, but far more challenging, circumstances during the Spanish Flu a century ago. Going back further, we see that quarantine was not unknown to the people of God even in biblical times. Leviticus gives numerous instances in which a person showing symptoms of various contagious diseases would be removed from Israel and quarantined outside the camp until the symptoms disappeared.

While there are a great many differences between us and God's people in the days of Leviticus under the Old Covenant, there are still principles we can gather from the instructions in Leviticus. One of the most important is that God is seriously concerned about the spread of disease among His people so His people must make reasonable efforts to limit the growth of contagions.

It's true that in Leviticus those who were quarantined were primarily folks showing symptoms, but the goal of the quarantine was to halt the spread of disease when there was evidence it was present. In our day, we know for certain there is a dreadfully contagious plague in our nation that does not always present symptoms. For that reason our rulers and medical experts have advised or required all businesses and people to limit their activities and the Session has complied with these orders and guidance because we are concerned to promote the life and health of *all* people made in God's image.

III. The Importance of Prayer

We are often reminded of the importance of prayer in times like these; even some government authorities have asked people to pray for God's mercy to be poured out on this land so that this pestilence may be removed. As we pray that God will remove the threat of the Coronavirus, it's important to remember that prayer is not enough!

Remember how the Apostle James mocks those who merely pray:

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? (James 2:14-16)

The Apostle is dealing with Christians who have the ability to meet the needs of an impoverished Christian, but rather than sacrifice to serve a genuinely needy brother or sister in Christ, they instead pray God would raise up someone else to do so.

The Scriptures are full of instances in which God's people pray, but they do not merely pray; their prayers motivate and shape the way they live. Prayer is not passivity. God's people pray and then live faithfully expecting God to answer their prayers either supernaturally or through the means of His Natural Law.

How does that look for our own situation? Indeed we should pray that God will withdraw this pestilence from the land, but we should not presume He will do so miraculously. Instead, we should "live out our prayers," by continuing to practice wisdom in our social interactions, washing our hands, limiting our trips away from home, not eating our boogers or licking doorknobs, and (of course) taking extra precautions if we are at risk for severe complications.

Not that long ago, the Governor of New York boasted about improving conditions in his state. He announced that God had no part in the reduction of the numbers, but instead took all the credit for himself, the policies he has mandated, and the healthcare professionals who have worked so hard to contain the virus. But the Governor's boast reveals a hard and heavy heart, doesn't it? All of those things the Governor cited as bringing the improved conditions were in fact merely the means by which God enabled the improvement through His maintenance His universe by Natural Law.

While we would be right to condemn the governor's remarks because of the pride and atheism behind them, Christians who merely pray for the removal of the virus, but do not live in light of God's Natural Law do little better. God's people should earnestly pray for His mercy upon our rebellious world, while at the same time doing everything within our power to slow its spread and care for those who have been afflicted by it whether medically, economically, or logistically (i.e. those who cannot leave home safely).

I look forward to hearing from you soon and, God willing, resuming our fellowship in public worship.

Your friend,



Ryan Biese,
Pastor