



# FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (PCA)

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July 30, 2020

Dear Saints of God in Christ,

It's been some time since I've been able to write to you. I continue to pray for you that God's grace would be magnified in our midst even though many of us are kept apart and we are unable to unite as a body for worship on Lord's Day mornings or evenings.

Our lack of visible unity has been weighing on me as well as the whole Session, and I assume many of you too. For that reason, Session continues work toward bringing the congregation together again for corporate worship on the Lord's Day in morning and evening worship.

That is one of the reasons that undergirds Session's policy requiring masks to be worn in the building while using common areas (e.g. worship, fellowship hall, Sunday school, etc.). While this virus is particularly brutal to "medically fragile people," it does not only infect and cripple those who suffer from "pre-existing complications," but rather infects and is transmitted by all sorts of people: young and old, portly and puny, tall and short, healthy and sickly. Nonetheless, the medically fragile are at even heightened risk of serious complication or death.

While we know remarkably little about the virus, one thing that is certain is that the virus is typically spread by folks who are pre-symptomatic, which is why mask wearing has been proven to diminish the spread.

For the sake of the health of the whole body and particularly out of consideration for and love of the "weak," among us, Session requires masks to be worn while we are together so that we can gather together and minimize the danger of transmission and infection particularly to our weaker brethren. Our goal in this policy is to enable our worship to express the unity that is ours in Christ.

## **I. OBJECTIONS TO THE MASK POLICY**

We have received some expressions of concern regarding this policy. Some fear by encouraging the wearing of masks that we are doubting God's sovereignty. Others fear by wearing masks we are acquiescing to a left-wing political agenda. Others have objected not because of fear, but because they do not wish to be inconvenienced by wearing a mask for the sake of a weaker brother.

I would like to address these three main objections quickly. I apologize for not doing so earlier and allowing the lack of communication regarding Session's reading to create suspicion.

### **A. *Personal Stewardship and the Sovereignty of God***

As Reformed Christians, we confess God's providence is executed ordinarily through means (e.g. a mask, a helmet, proper diet and exercise, epiPen). If a person argues that using something to prevent infection is doubting God's sovereignty, it shows a lack of understanding of the Bible's teaching on God's Providence. Such a view suggests human choices do not matter and rather represents a fatalistic worldview more reflective of Greek paganism than Christianity.

God's sovereignty enables our choices to be meaningful. God's sovereignty is not to be confused with fatalism. Jesus condemns a fatalistic understanding of providence when Satan suggests he jump off the temple as well as in His Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins. Since Christ calls all His people to watchfulness (cf. Matt 25:13) over spiritual things, we certainly ought to be watchful over matters of our brother's health and wellbeing also.

One of the ways we exercise stewardship in a pandemic such as this over our lives and those of our neighbors is by washing our hands, keeping our distance, and wearing a mask.

## **B. Left-Wing Political Agenda**

Session is not buying into any media hype, but has consulted medical professionals (a hospitalist, a primary care physician, and an ER nurse), well-substantiated articles in medical journals, and official publications as we crafted this policy. While early on in the pandemic (March and April) there was some division over whether masking was effective, medical and public health professionals now almost ubiquitously urge all people to wear a mask in public not to protect oneself, but to provide protection to other people.

Far from being a Left-Wing conspiracy, the importance of wearing a mask in public seems to be the one thing on which politicians across the political spectrum agree. But Session's requirement that masks be worn in the building is not about politics or in response to any government mandate. Session's policy is to promote unity in the body and to enable both strong and weak Christians to worship together on the Lord's Day.

Indeed, in American society (i.e. "the World") people are strongly divided over whether masks infringe on their personal rights. But personal rights within the body of Christ are our least concern, aren't they? Should not the Church stand in stark contrast to the world as we unite in this time of division, anger, fear, and unrest? Will our congregation, will this Church resemble the world in the way we approach masking requirements or will we model Christian unity and brotherly love?

## **C. The Inconvenience of Masks**

It's true, masks are hot, cumbersome, uncomfortable, and get damp. And at one point we were offering two types of services to provide an opportunity for the strong to worship mask-free and with some semblance of normalcy. But the problem with that set-up is that the body of Christ is divided, the weak are segregated off into a different service so as not to inconvenience the strong. But is pushing the weak and vulnerable into a segregated service a Christ-like attitude?

It's understandable the strong among us see this policy as an imposition by the weak. But is not the call of Christ for the strong to lay down their "rights" to accommodate, serve, and bless the weak? Is that not the example the Saviour gave in His own life as He veiled the glory, power, and majesty that radiated from Him from all eternity and took on the likeness of sinful flesh so He could serve the weak?

***C***omplete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.  
(Philippians 2:2-8)

In the Christian church, the discussion of our own personal rights, convenience, and preferences cannot begin until we have first considered the needs of our brethren in Christ (cf. Jas. 2:14-17).

## **II. EXPRESSING UNITY IN AN AGE OF SOCIAL DISTANCING**

### **A. Returning to Corporate Worship**

In order to foster the sense of unity that *is already ours* in Christ, Session has decided to phase out both the 11:00 and 9:00 services and instead have one morning service at 10:45 a.m. **We will go down to one morning service and one evening service beginning August 16.** We will use the first

two weeks of August to help people continue to adjust to the mask policy before the new (old!) schedule takes effect.

Wearing a mask for an hour or so is uncomfortable and annoying, but we believe it is a small sacrifice to make in order to create an environment that reduces the risk of infection for our weaker brethren. After all, if you submit to wearing a mask so you can get groceries, pick-up hardware, or keep your job, surely you can also submit to wearing a mask to worship with Christ's body, because worship is even more important than any of those vital things.

Our desire is that the strong and the weak can come *together* for morning and evening worship on the day Christ rose from the dead and *together* confess our faith, gratitude, and love of Him in corporate worship *together*. The only way we can make the weak comfortable in this is if the strong will - like our common Saviour - lay down their rights, suffer inconvenience for the good of others, and serve (in this case, by wearing a mask for up to seventy minutes).

### **B. Returning to the Lord's Table**

Christ has given His Table as one of the chief expressions of our common salvation in Him. Indeed the Greek word rendered *communion* could - and is - just as easily translated *fellowship*.

For that reason, it is very fitting that we return to the Lord's Table on August 16 when we have also returned to one morning service. While the presence of the virus among us has not abated, the Session believes we must resume observance of the Lord's Supper, so we will return to our usual evening communion schedule, with the Supper served on the third Lord's Day of each month.

There will, obviously, be a few logistical, circumstantial changes to the way we come to the Table in order to strive to protect all who participate. But nonetheless, we will share by faith in Christ's body and blood as the bread and wine are set before the saints.

The Lord's Table is a beautiful call to the Christian life as it demonstrates Christian unity in the midst of the many divisions in the wider society and culture. At the Table, Christians must lay down their distinctions, their differences, and their suspicions so that - whether strong or weak - they may come to feast on Christ by faith and celebrate the union we have with Him and each other. At the Lord's Table there is no distinction between the strong and the weak: we all come empty and leave full because of God's grace toward us in Christ.

***But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Cor. 12:9-10)***

I know for many of us masks are a distraction as we sing and pray and worship, but I hope you will strive to overcome yet another distraction so we can worship together. And if you're not yet comfortable coming back, please know we will continue to pray for you, welcome you back when you are ready, and hope you'll continue to join us virtually via Facebook Live or the YouTube channel.

Your friend,



Ryan Biese,  
Pastor