



FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (PCA)

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November 24, 2020

Dear First Pres Family,

What a month this has been! We began the month receiving the concerning news that a symptomatic person attended the 9:15 a.m. service on Nov. 1. Mercifully, that incident turned into a non-event; the person was fully masked, and no cases have developed as a result. We thank God immensely that none of the high risk people worshipping at that service were impacted!

But then later this month we had at least another six church members develop symptoms of Coronavirus on or about Nov. 12. These dear saints are from five different households and all of them attended the second worship service on Nov. 8. While symptoms can take up to 14 days to manifest, most cases of coronavirus become symptomatic within four days after exposure. The timeline suggests this cluster of at least six cases began as a result of an exposure at the Nov. 8 worship service. Was this an asymptomatic carrier or someone who misidentified his or her symptoms? Who knows; it's not helpful to speculate.

But for this reason, I plead with everyone to wear a mask when we resume corporate worship services this Lord's Day, Nov. 29 and to abide by the other policies Session has put in place to prevent the spread of disease during our worship: hand hygiene and maintaining a six-foot distance between households.

While Session has not been willing to prevent non-compliant people from entering worship for the 10:45 a.m. service, it is our hope and prayer that all people will abide by the policy of their own accord (even if reluctantly) and encourage one another in this area also.

All activities have various risk for spreading and contracting Covid; going to a grocery store is low risk, eating at a restaurant is moderate risk, and a worship service is a high risk activity in this regard. That may explain why - as of now - there are zero cases stemming from those exposed on Wednesday night, but greater than 10% of the people present in the second service on Nov. 8 tested positive for and/or exhibited key symptoms of Covid. The difference in risk between our Midweek Activities versus Worship is one reason for the difference in protocol between Wednesday and Sunday.

Here is a [LINK](#) to an explanation of the recent science regarding masks to protect others, not the wearers. **This is why Session believes requiring masks is a way to ensure corporate worship is able to continue uninterrupted in the future.** Our scientific understanding, of course, is always changing and as better information becomes available and our understanding grows, we will adapt and revise our policies.

I realize many of us are opposed to wearing masks for public worship, but I beg you - given this recent outbreak - to reconsider your position and abide by the Session's policy. Here are three additional reasons I ask you to consider before disregarding Session's policy.

I. Concern for the Reputation of the Church

While these times are unsettling and frightening to Worldlings, in times such as these God's people must display *reasonableness* (Phil. 4:5), *wisdom* (Col. 4:5), and *peace* (I Cor. 14:33) because of what is ours in Christ. Our attitude should be a clear contrast to the fear and terror unbelievers are manifesting in the face of this new cause of death.

Nonetheless, our wise, reasonable, and peaceful response to uncertain times should not be confused with fatalism or an attitude of carelessness regarding our own health or that of others. If our gatherings seem to manifest a spirit that is ambivalent to the current public health crisis or we seem unmoved by the pleadings of health professionals for caution, how does that reflect on Christ? We must strive not to allow people to think our faith in Christ has made us reckless simply because we know our God has already numbered our days in advance (Psalm 139:16).

So even if you anticipate that the current preventive measures will be shown to be entirely ineffective, then please practice these three measures - masks, hygiene, distance - when we are together in worship so as not to give offense to outsiders.

Nonetheless the Session, in consultation with the medical professionals who are members of this congregation, does believe these measures will hinder the spread of disease here. **Unlike the outbreak of a couple weeks ago, masks, hygiene, and social distance need not keep us from worshipping together. It may (okay, will) be less comfortable, but they need not keep us from corporate worship.**

Yet even if you disagree with the conclusion of the Session and the medical professionals in the congregation regarding the efficacy of these prevention measures, matters such as this were exactly what the Apostle Paul had in mind when he wrote:

For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings. (1 Cor. 9:19–23)

Please let us live and worship together with our number one priority being sharing in gospel blessings with one another and so do what we can to prevent another outbreak here. **Wearing a mask need not keep us from corporate worship, but another outbreak of Covid may force upon us another season in which we must go ‘virtual only’ for worship.**

The Scripture is filled with reminders of our Christian duty to obey the civil magistrate for the sake of conscience and the sake of the reputation of Christ’s Church. Here in Georgia, our governor has requested and recommended people wear masks when in public. It is wise that we acquiesce to that small request not only to prevent a further outbreak and shutdown at FPFO, but also to present a positive witness to outsiders.

The Saviour has instructed us how to respond to unjust - but not sinful - demands and commands of government authorities with willing obedience: “*And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles*” (Matt. 5:41). How much more should we be willing to abide by these small requests and recommendations regarding masking, distancing, and hand washing from the governor whom God has graciously place as His minister for our good here in Georgia?

II. Purpose of Christian Liberty

Many of us resent mask requirements because of the imposition on us. In American society, there is vigorous debate on whether or which civil authorities have the constitutional authority to mandate masks. But for those who live as subjects of the *Kingdom of God* and members of the *Church and Household of God* (1 Tim 3:15), we are to view our rights and liberties as well as impositions differently than worldlings do.

As Christians we are not to first of all think in terms of our own rights, but how we can serve Christ. As Christians our liberty has a very specific purpose: to serve other people:

For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.
(Galatians 5:13)

Out in the world, society is being ripped apart by those who insist on their right(s) to do or not do something. But within the Church we can’t be so concerned about our own rights, but rather being “*all things to all people,*” so that Christ will be more attractive. Additionally, what will it show the world about the power of the gospel to create unity and love within the body of Christ if Christians put aside our own preferences and American concern for rights and get along on this point even if we disagree, even if we’re inconvenienced, even if we exhibit a sanctified skepticism?

Sometimes Christians disagree, but we must submit to those in authority over us (Heb. 13:17) for the sake of the unity and order that enables the gospel to thrive and in which Christ is honored:

Addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. (Eph. 5:19–21)

I know this is asking a lot of those of you who oppose wearing a mask in public worship. I know this is asking a lot of those of you whose glasses fog up and you can’t really see. I know this is asking a lot of those of you whose noses - like mine - are extra big and extra sensitive to rubbing and “mask chafing” (is that a thing now?). But please let us together use our liberty to serve one another, even where we disagree or are inconvenienced:

I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord. Yes, I ask you also... help these women, who have labored side by side with me in the gospel ... whose names are in the book of life. (Phil. 4:2-3)

I don't know what these two dear saints were fighting about in Philippi, but whatever it was I am certain it was very significant to each of them. And yet, it was probably less significant than an irritated nose or foggy spectacles. So please, let us "agree in the Lord" here too and try to live and worship together in unity and love (even if we're wrong).

III. Duty to Care for Our Neighbors

I had a very mild case of Coronavirus. In fact, the vast majority of people recover from Covid at home within about ten days and without needing more than a Tylenol or Advil. However, even those mild cases often leave lingering effects for several weeks or more.

I recently read an article in the *Wall Street Journal*, which cited preliminary data from a couple of studies that considered the long and intermediate effects of Covid specifically among young, healthy people who also had mild cases. It noted the studies suggest that as many as 10-25% of those young people with mild cases continue to have severe and bizarre lingering effects such as memory loss and fatigue that prevent them from getting on with life or returning to normal activities. Yes, they survived Covid, but their quality of life has been drastically diminished. Surely we want more for our neighbor than his mere survival?

The studies also noted that it seems those who have mild cases of Covid may in fact be more likely to suffer more severe lingering effects. Since the vast majority of Covid cases are very mild, this information is rather alarming.

So while the immediate effects of Covid on most people may be slightly irritating (e.g. not being able to taste Thanksgiving dinner), it seems the long term effects (for those who do survive) may be life altering.

When we considered the sixth commandment a couple of weeks ago, one of the things we saw in the Scripture is that our duty is not simply to refrain from murdering our neighbor, but to reasonably promote our neighbor's health, safety, and wellbeing: as Jesus says, "*you shall love your neighbor as yourself*" and the Apostle Paul adds: "*...for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it*" (Matt. 19:21, Eph. 5:29).

Covid does not simply assault the health of our neighbors, but the lives and sometimes livelihoods of those who live with the sick. Not everyone who contracted Covid from the Nov. 8 service was able to work from home and not every employer is able to provide "sick pay" for those who cannot work as a result of being stricken with coronavirus or on home isolation due to a family member developing symptoms. Remember it's not just the sick who are required to stay home, but all who live with them and/or who were exposed to them (here's the [LINK](#) to the CDC guidance adopted by many employers and states).

By wearing masks in worship, we can not only do the best we can to ensure there is no further outbreak here, we're also manifesting the love we have for the one body, the body of Christ. I hope and pray that even if you are not convinced of the efficacy of masks, you will be able to worship with us for the sake of Christian unity and bear with the rest of us.

I wish all of you a happy Thanksgiving; I hope (those of you who, unlike me, can taste food) will enjoy a wonderful meal and think on the blessings of God to us all in the past year. I'll leave you with the words of John Calvin as he summarizes the Sixth Commandment:

The Lord has bound mankind together by a certain unity; hence each man ought to concern himself with the safety of all. To sum up, then, all violence injury, and any harmful thing at all that may injure our neighbor's body are forbidden to us. We are accordingly commanded, if we find anything of use to us in saving our neighbours' lives, faithfully to employ it; if there is anything that makes for their peace to see to it; if anything harmful, to ward it off; if they are in danger to lend a helping hand.

Your pastor,



Ryan Biese