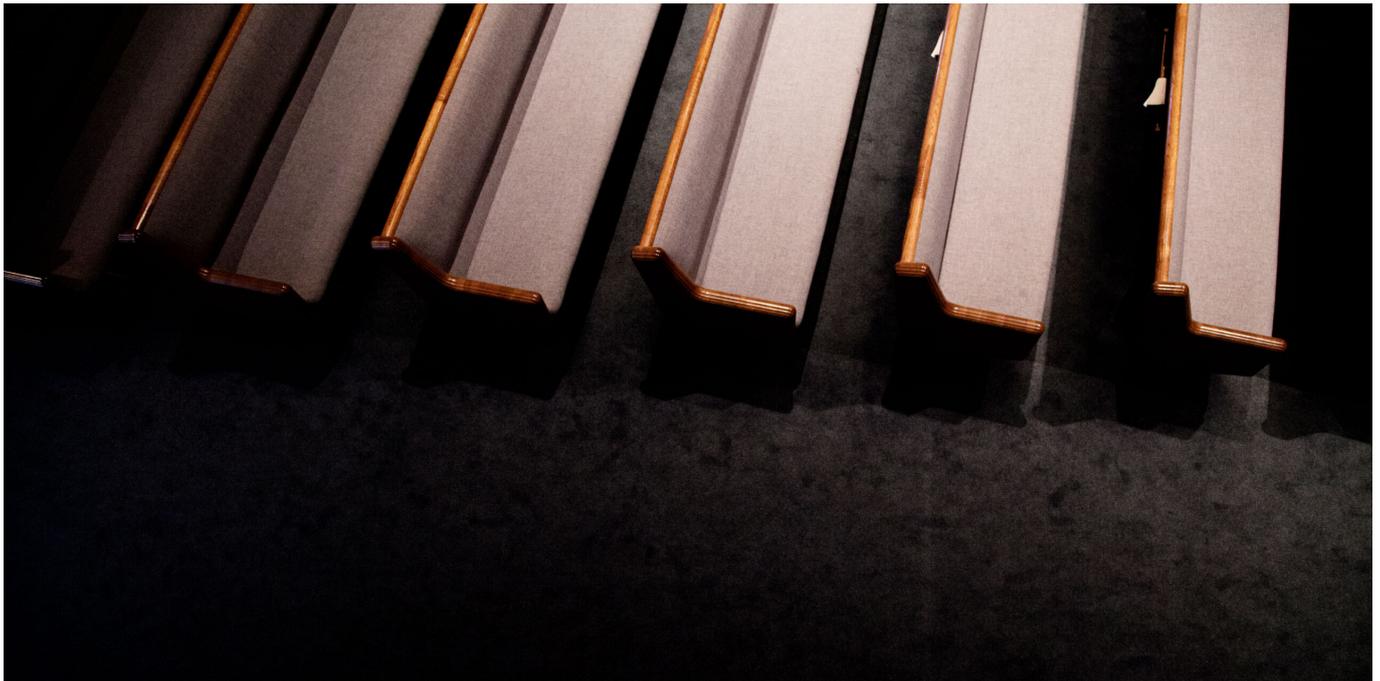


On Cancelling Worship Services During a Pandemic

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Reading Time: 8 minutes

What we are experiencing today is a once-in-a-100-years pandemic, according to the experts. Perhaps around the year 2120—if the Lord doesn't burn the earth up before then—Christians will be looking through their historical archives to find what was written by Christians during the 2020 pandemic. They are going to learn from us, just as we have eagerly read the few articles we can find written by Christians in 1918 during the Spanish Flu epidemic. **And just like they did in 1918, Christians today are wrestling with this question: Can congregations cancel worship services during a pandemic?**

I don't know of any congregation that has cancelled worship during this COVID-19 pandemic. It seems that most have, for the time being, cancelled (or severely limited) all *corporate assemblies* of the church as a whole. But our worship is alive and well. Our Christianity has never been limited to the church building. The large assemblies have just been broken up temporarily and are now several smaller assemblies. Every eldership that

has made this decision is still encouraging worship, but only in the safety of our homes (for the time being).

From what we know about COVID-19, this virus is highly contagious. This new strain of coronavirus has a fatality rate it seems between 2-5%, making it about 10 times more deadly than the flu. The elderly are certainly more at risk, but it looks increasingly like the young are more susceptible to the virus than we initially thought. While it appears to be more contagious than other coronaviruses, luckily, it doesn't have the fatality rate of other coronaviruses, such as SARS (11%) and MERS (37%). However, unlike the common flu, what makes COVID-19 so problematic is the fact that you can be contagious much longer (anywhere between 2-12 days) *before you start showing any symptoms of infection yourself*. In other words, you may feel normal and healthy while transmitting the virus to others around you—including the elderly and the immuno-compromised. Think of yourself being an unintentional weapon against your innocent brothers and sisters and then against their family members w/whom they come in contact.

There is a congregation in western Kentucky that decided to have a corporate worship assembly at their church building last week (despite the official warnings). A few days later, their county health department contacted the church leadership, informing them that someone in attendance the past Sunday tested positive for COVID-19, and thus everyone who attended that day should self-quarantine for 10 days.¹ Because the congregation's leadership decided to meet that Sunday—despite the multiple warnings—the community has interpreted the congregation's decision on Sunday as reckless endangerment, and the image of the church is now unnecessarily blemished. **(Some crucial questions for every eldership that is still asking the church to corporately assemble on Sunday: Are you ready for something like this to happen with your congregation? Are you ready for someone in your assembly to eventually contract the COVID-19 virus and die?)**

Are congregations today authorized by Scripture to postpone their normal Sunday or Wednesday corporate assemblies during a pandemic? I believe they are. While a pandemic is not the same thing as persecution (an important point to make), there are some similarities in biblical precedent. **When persecution flared up in Jerusalem, the church scattered** (Acts 8:1; 11:19). There is no indication that the apostles or elders of the church argued, "Because we are commanded to meet on the first day of the week, we must meet in the same fashion we have met previously." Instead, they scattered. They appear to have continued to meet, but underground and in smaller groups. And there's also no indication that they sinned in doing so.

There are some biblical commands that are simply impossible to follow to their fullest extent during extreme circumstances (much to our regret). This has always been the case. For

example, while Israelites were commanded to “remember the Sabbath Day, to keep it holy” by not working (Exo. 20:8-12), implied was the fact that there were sometimes exceptions. God permitted, for example, acts of benevolence, healing, rescue, and feeding during extreme circumstances (Mark 2:23-26; Luke 14:2-6). Why? Because “the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27). Another example would be God’s will regarding the home. There is a command for women to be “keepers at home” (Titus 2:5)—one verse among several that demonstrate God’s desire for men to be the providers for the home while their wives embrace their role as workers at home. Anything that detracts from this is inherently disordered. But suppose her husband has died, has left her, or is disabled. She may not be able to be much of a homemaker, as she may be forced (to her dismay) to work outside the home to provide for her children. Is she sinning? I do not believe so, yet the disordered role she must assume is still not ideal.

Similarly, Christians have the apostolic example of assembling on Sunday, the “Lord’s Day” (Acts 20:7cf. Rev. 1:10). We don’t just meet on Sundays; we assemble at various times throughout the week (cf. Acts 2:42). We are not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together anytime we normally gather, and that command is not restricted to Sunday (Heb. 10:24-25). But what if our spouse or our child is sick? Depending on the situation, we may elect to stay home to care for our sick loved one. Are we wrong for doing so? Of course not—though the situation is less than ideal. But we know such a disordered situation is only temporary, and we work so we can soon assemble with the saints as we normally would.

There is no adequate, long-term substitute for physically assembling with the saints. We need to sing with one another (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16). We need to encourage one another (Heb. 10:25). We need to express our love for one another (cf. 1 John 3:11; 1 Thess. 4:9) by hugging and laughing and exchanging body language. Physical contact and interaction is an integral part of the Christian community. **But there are simply circumstances—luckily rare circumstances—where our physical interaction must be limited. The situation a global pandemic presents is less than ideal, but we joyfully know it is also temporary. And what a blessing that the church in 2020 can mitigate the severity of our temporary isolation with text messages, phone calls, Facebook groups, videos, and live-streamed services.**

We still must contribute to the work of the church (2 Cor. 9:7). We still must pray (Phil. 4:6-7). We still must feed on the pure milk of the word (1 Pet. 2:1-2). We still must find ways to practice the “one another” passages in the New Testament (Eph. 4:2; 32; 1 John 4:7; 21; etc.). And with the small number of people we are able to assemble with while still taking healthy precautions, we assemble (Heb. 10:24-25)—even if it is only with our immediate family members. And we anxiously pray that this pandemic will pass so we can once again assemble corporately as the church.

Among some well-meaning brethren (who just desire to be faithful), there are still a few misnomers about cancelling our church assemblies. Let's consider a few:

1. Isn't it a violation of Hebrews 10:25 to cancel services?

No. Consider Hebrews 10:24-27:

24 And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, 25 not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

26 For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, 27 but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.

These Hebrew Christians in chapter 10 are warned against walking away from Christ and returning to Judaism. (In fact, the whole letter is a warning against apostasy.) They are to remain steadfast to the new covenant (cf. Heb. 8:6), knowing there is no hope outside of Christ.

In verse 24, they are commanded to encourage one another on to greater maturity. Naturally, they cannot do this as effectively if they are absent from the assemblies. Thus, verse 25 commands Christians not to miss any of the assemblies of the church. Notice the specific command: "Not neglecting to meet together" (ESV), or "not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together" (NKJV).

Now, don't miss this: Verse 25 is not specifically about the *Sunday* worship assembly *per se*, but *all* assemblies of the church! The inspired author does not say, "do not forsake 'the' assembly" (as if Sunday is 'the' only assembly I must attend). Instead he says, "not forsaking the *assembling*." What Hebrews 10:25 teaches in reality is that if the church is meeting at all, my attendance is mandatory (regardless of whether it is Sunday AM worship, or Wednesday PM Bible study) because every event is important.

But notice the phrase, "as is the habit of some" (v. 25). *This is not about people who desire to assemble, but about people who **don't** desire to assemble.* Hebrews 10:25 is written to

Christians who are drifting in their faith (Heb. 2:1), dull of hearing (Heb. 5:11), and immature (Heb. 6:1). In other words, Hebrews 10:25 is not about people who are forced to be absent against their wishes, but people who choose to be absent because God is not their first priority (Heb. 11:22, cf. Matt. 6:33). This passage is written to individual Christians who are at risk of wandering away from the community of the church.

Further, if the elders have temporarily replaced the corporate assembling of the church with smaller assemblies, how can an individual be guilty of neglecting to the corporate assembly? If the elders have asked the members in their care to worship in their own homes, you are now guilty of sin if you choose not to comply with their request.

2. By cancelling our corporate worship assemblies, aren't we de-emphasizing the importance of worshipping God?

No. We can worship God regardless of the location (John 4:19-24), and the assembly size (regardless of whether I am alone or with 500 other Christians) does not effect its importance. Yet, if this pandemic is teaching us anything, it is teaching us the added value of singing, praying, teaching, and encouraging one another *as a group*. I miss my church family. In the meantime, I will emphasize my devotion to God by still worshipping in my home even in a pandemic. All churches I know of—who have cancelled their corporate assemblies—are offering alternative worship options via livestreaming.

3. Shouldn't Christians continue to assemble for worship, even when it is illegal—risking persecution and death?

Yes, they should. That is not to say that Christians cannot take precautions to minimize getting caught in such circumstances (cf. Acts 12:17), but we must be willing to confess Christ before all men (Matt. 10:32; Luke 12:8) - including the executioner. However, when a secular government asks its citizens to temporarily curtail all assemblies in the wake of a pandemic, that is not persecution. We may accommodate such a request without violating any biblical principle. A pandemic is not the same thing as persecution. And our God-appointed governing authorities (cf. Rom. 13:1-7) appreciate churches today having smaller assemblies and thus helping them protect the citizenry.

4. Christians shouldn't cancel meetings out of fear.

I don't know of any church that has temporarily postponed her corporate assemblies out of fear. Christians must not fear death (Matt 10:28; Psa. 23:4; 1 John 4:18; 2 Tim. 1:7). We do, however, love one another (John 13:34; 1 John 4:20; 1 Pet. 4:8; Rom. 12:10). Churches can ask people to sit far apart from one another—even sitting so far apart that they remain in their own homes—out of love and concern for the wellbeing of one another. We are to care for the physical needs of those who are at-risk (Jas. 1:27).

5. How can we justify cancelling our corporate worship assembly on Sunday and still go to work and go shopping on Monday?

Federal, state, and local governments, as well as other medical professionals, are encouraging people to avoid all of the above. If you can work from home, please do so. If you can avoid going to the store except for necessities, please do so. While there may be some weak Christians who are inconsistent in their social isolation, we must all pursue consistency.

Conclusion

God bless each of us as we face this pandemic. Our parents did not face this. Our elders did not have predecessors who faced this. But thank our Lord that we have His word. By His grace, we can apply the principles preserved for us by the Holy Spirit and find our way through this difficult time. May God have mercy on us when we err, though we try to get it right. May He bless and protect each of us during this time.

Footnotes

1. <https://www.wkms.org/post/murray-church-says-visitor-tested-positive-coronavirus>