

## The Importance of Corporate Worship

*Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, <sup>2</sup> fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Heb. 12:1-2)*

Earlier in the month Andrew Cuomo, the governor of NY, ruled that in areas determined to be “red zones” no more than 10 people could gather in religious services and in “orange zones” no more than 25 — no matter how big the church, mosque or temple.

However, late Wednesday night the U.S. Supreme Court decided in a 5-4 ruling that New York Governor Andrew Cuomo cannot discriminate against religious groups when it comes to Covid-19 restrictions.

This foundation of the original lawsuit was that Governor Cuomo’s rules categorized business such as acupuncture, garages, campgrounds, big box stores etc... as essential ... with absolutely no limits number of people but limited the number of worshippers at either 10 or 25 even when many of the houses of worship in those areas could accommodate 400 to 1000.

In other words, acupuncture was considered essential ... worship was not.

Justice Neal Gorsuch wrote in his brief,

“It is time – past time – to make plain that, while the pandemic poses many grave challenges, there is no world in which the Constitution tolerates color-coded executive edicts that reopen liquor stores and bike shops but shuts churches, synagogues.”

The Supreme Court ruled,

“There can be no question that the challenged restrictions if enforced, **will cause irreparable harm.**”

The justices acknowledged some worshippers could view services on television. But they wrote,

*“Such remote viewing (online) is not the same as personal attendance. Catholics who watch a Mass at home cannot receive communion, and there are important religious traditions in the Orthodox Jewish faith that require personal attendance.”*

While I am thankful for this ruling, I am even more thankful for the clarity in the Supreme Court Justice’s reasoning in their ruling.

They are acknowledging that corporate worship (the gathering of God’s people together) to preach, pray, sing, baptize, take the Lord’s supper ...

... this is necessary, it is essential!

There is no “church” without “gathering.”

You can look online and find medical reports, statistics, and experts that will support any position one you want to take in the COVID CONTROVERSY discussion.

- For masks ... against masks
- For sheltering in place ... for herd immunity

I don’t deny that millions of people have been infected with Covid-19.

- ... I don’t deny that many people have died as a result of it.
- ... I don’t deny the current statistics that .06% of the people who contract COVID will die.
- I readily acknowledge that those with compromised immunity should follow the advice of their medical professionals.
- I respect that. But that is NOT my focus today.

**My focus is this:** what is the responsibility of the church and the pastors during times of danger?

Certainly, we don’t believe that anyone should be forced to go to church at any time or even criticized because they chose to follow stronger measures of safety.

... we respect that ... we defend that ...

However, today my focus is that the opposite is also true.

Just as people should not be forced to attend church, likewise, people should not be prevented from going to church or criticized because they chose too.

**I'm going to read 4 key passages of scripture and then I want to ask you a question.**

***(Rom. 10:13-14) for "WHOEVER WILL CALL ON THE NAME OF THE LORD WILL BE SAVED." How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher?***

Paul says preaching and preacher are essential.

***<sup>16</sup> Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God. <sup>17</sup> Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father. (Col. 3:16-17)***

Notice Paul writes that believers singing together the songs of faith with thankfulness is instructive and encouraging.

***(1 Cor. 11:20-22) Therefore when you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper, for in your eating each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry, and another is drunk. What! Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink? Or do you despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? In this I will not praise you.***

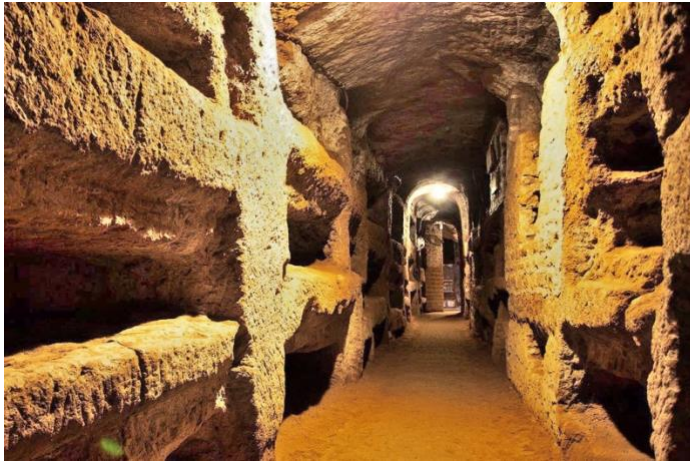
Here Paul is rebuking the Corinthian church for not coming together with the primary purpose of taking the Lord's supper but just to have a big meal and some of the people are getting drunk.

***(Heb. 10:23-25) Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.***

Now here is my question:

Is it not the ministers' calling and duty, even in perilous times, to provide for God's people to gather together, hear God's Word, sing, to take the Lord's Supper, and to pray if they desire to do so?

**1. It is good for God's people to assemble and worship even in times of danger.**



**Somewhere between the 2nd and 3rd milestones** of the Appian Way in Rome is the entrance to this underground complex of tunnels called the Catacombs.

Because of the persecution of Christians from the reign of Nero (64A.D.) until the reign of Galerius in 311 A.D. that the followers of Jesus Christ hid in this place to find safety for life and worship.

Even today these Catacombs remain as a monument to the commitment of Christians to gather and worship even in the most dangerous of circumstances.

The sacredness of this hiding place is so profound that even after the legalization of Christianity in 313 A.D. believers continued to be buried here.

It is estimated that around a half million Christians are buried in this place, many of them martyrs.

- Polycarp of Smyrna
- Justin Martyr
- Ptolemaeus

- Lucius
- Pothinus, bishop of Lyon
- Fabian
- Sebastian
- Felix
- Adauctus
- Marcellinus
- Ignatius of Antioch
- Lawrence of Rome

This is just a partial list of ministers and Christians who risked life and limb and paid the ultimate price.

For more than 300 years, Christians existed on the fringes of society ...

... their worship outlawed and their lifestyle persecuted

... and yet all the while the church grew in spirit and in number.

Despite harsh and deadly forms of intimidation meant to destroy the church, the number of Christian believers steadily multiplied.



**The USSR existed from 1917-1991.**

Soviet authorities brutally suppressed and persecuted the different branches of Christianity.

The Communist Party destroyed churches and synagogues.

They ridiculed, harassed, incarcerated and executed religious leaders.

According to some sources, the total number of Christian killed by the Soviet regime is estimated to be from 12 to 20 million.

... At least 106,300 Russian pastors were executed during the Great Purge.

During the first five years of the USSR the Bolsheviks executed 28 Russian Orthodox bishops and over 1,200 Russian Orthodox priests-...

... many others were imprisoned and exiled.

... Following WW2 Christians in the USSR (Baptists, Pentecostals, Presbyterians, Orthodox etc...) were forcibly sent to mental hospitals.

... they tried and imprisoned

... some were forcibly deprived of their parental rights.

Some of that could have been avoided if the ministers, Christians, and churches would have just canceled worshiping together.

**Chinese authorities have detained,** fined, and imprisoned Christians for public worship...

Last week, a court in Xinjiang convicted five Protestants who attended a Bible study charging them with “gathering a crowd to disrupt social order,” Asia News reported.

The verdict came with five-year prison sentences for two pastors, and four- and three-year sentences for three others.

Please allow me to repeat my question:

*Is it not the ministers' calling and duty, even in perilous times, to provide for God's people to gather together, to hear God's Word, sing praises, to take the Lord's Supper, and to pray?*

Our easy willingness to cancel worship and our reluctance to provide the gospel ministry to those who desire it in this crisis

... this fear of condemnation by our religious peers that keeps us from being faithful,

... is nothing less than a betrayal of our calling!

The world needs the church to be courageous!

The world needs to know that there is one group of people who belong to God!

*You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Your light must shine before people in such a way that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 5:14-16)*

We are not afforded the comfort or the luxury of hiding away in fear.

**C. S. Lewis said:** In such a fearful world, we need a fearless church.

Throughout history, in times of danger and even persecution, Christian pastors have not refrained from leading God's people in worship.

Instead, those God-called ministers obeyed the Lord and behaved as if their life was not their own for the sake of the people of God and the glorious cause of Jesus Christ!

I tell you today their charge is also our charge!

Paul's instruction and the instruction in the book of Hebrews is as valid and true now, as it was 2000 years ago.

It is good for God's people to assemble and worship even in times of danger.

## **2. It is good to remember that God numbers our days and orders our life.**

I do not believe that we can afford to hide behind the cliché "the church is not the building."

Let's be honest, that has never been our claim.

... no one thought the building was the body of Christ.

The claim is not that the church is the building but that the church is the PEOPLE gathered in **that** place.

Our hearts go out to in compassion to those people who vulnerable, suffer illnesses, who have compromised immune systems.

But ALSO, ALSO our hearts go out to that multitude of believers who are spiritually languishing for lack of corporate worship.

Don't they also matter?

Should not the rising tide of addiction, abuse, and divorce brought on by "sheltering in place" also trouble us.

But what about the danger of infection or being a super spreader?

What if I get sick, I have a family to take care of?

*And which of you by worrying can add a single day to his life's span? (Matthew 6:27)*

Money will not extend your life and worry will not shorten it.

*For You created my innermost parts; You wove me in my mother's womb. I will give thanks to You, because I am awesomely and wonderfully made; Wonderful are Your works, and my soul knows it very well. My frame was not hidden from You. When I was made in secret, and skillfully formed in the depths of the earth; Your eyes have seen my formless substance; And in Your book were written. All the days that were ordained for me, when as yet there was not one of them. (Psalm 139:13-16)*

The Bible is clear, God has ordained the length of your life.

You can affect the quality of your life, but you cannot extend it.

I'm saying if you trust God with your soul, that will live forever, why would you not trust God with your physical life?

**It has been said:** "Worry is a thin stream of fear trickling through the mind. If encouraged, it cuts a channel into which all other thoughts are drained."

It is good for God's people to assemble and worship even in times of danger.



It is good to remember that God numbers our days and orders our life.

I want to leave you with the same words that the Apostle Paul left Timothy.

*I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: <sup>2</sup> preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. <sup>3</sup> For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, <sup>4</sup> and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths. <sup>5</sup> But you, be sober in all things, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry. <sup>6</sup> For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. <sup>7</sup> I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; <sup>8</sup> in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing. (2 Tim. 4:1-8)*