

The Church and the COVID-19/Coronavirus Pandemic

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This article was written in April 2020 during the height of the COVID-19 Pandemic. See Note following the article.

As some have probably learned from visiting various church Websites, our brethren are responding in different ways to the current (2019) COVID-19 (Coronavirus) Pandemic. Some have canceled Wednesday night meetings while continuing all Sunday meetings. Some have trimmed meetings to Sunday morning only. Some have canceled all meetings till the health authorities declare the crisis is passed and are now conducting “virtual assemblies” for their scattered brethren by technological means. The men of the Northpoint congregation in Denton, Texas, where Diane and I are members briefly discontinued Wednesday night meetings on April 1 (which meetings have now been resumed) while continuing all of its Sunday schedule. We postponed our spring Gospel meeting, scheduled for April 5–8, 2020.

Due to the rapid contagion of the virus, on March 20 our county officials placed us under a Mandate forbidding religious groups of any size to meet until further notice, threatening possible arrest, 180 days of jail time, and/or a \$1,000 fine for violators. As indicated above, the church here continued to meet in spite of this Mandate. However, on April 1, 2020 Texas Governor Gregg Abbott, countermanded statewide the Mandate that forbade churches to meet, while strongly encouraging “meetings” by means of technology instead. He further strongly advised that any actual assemblies observe the 6 feet of “social distancing.” As of April 10, we had 426 confirmed cases in Denton County, with 159 in the city. County-wide, 8 had died while 131 had recovered. A University of Chicago report listed our county as a “hot spot” regarding the virus.

I know of no **specific** Scripture that in all cases provides the clear solution to the problem of whether to meet or not to meet on the Lord’s Day under such circumstances. We must therefore study and seek to harmonize the passages that state and/or imply (1) the necessity of assembling faithfully when we are physically able to do so (e.g., Mat. 6:33; Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 16:1–2; Heb. 10:25; et al.) with passages that (2) emphasize our responsibilities to be concerned for the welfare of ourselves, our family members, our brethren, and all men (Mat. 7:12; 22:37–39; Gal. 6:10; Phi. 2:4; 1 Tim. 5:8; et al.), plus those passages that (3) order us to obey “the powers that are ordained of God” (Mat. 22:21; Rom. 13:1–7; 1 Pet. 2:13–17; et al.).

Some faithful brethren are convinced that the church must meet as usual "no matter what" the physical or legal risk may be. Other equally faithful brethren are of the persuasion that the issues of care and concern both for one's own health and for the health of others – plus respect for the government edicts that seek to protect us – must be considered. Some of these brethren point to God's edict concerning leprosy, requiring lepers to be isolated and remain apart from the congregation until pronounced "clean" (Lev. 13:42–46). Although this injunction is in the Old Testament, they see in it God's principle of protecting the congregation and outsiders [i.e., "strangers among them"] from disease.

While I'm very uncomfortable with even the idea of dismissing the Lord's day assemblies for any reason, I am equally uncomfortable with continuing to meet due to the threat (both for myself and for others) of infection with a deadly disease for which presently there is neither a preventive nor cure. I am concerned about the possibility of my already carrying it with no symptoms to so indicate, thereby infecting others. I am also concerned about being infected by unknown carriers in our assemblies, which dangers are not merely hypothetical.

I pray that faithful brethren who differ on their reactions to the current crisis will allow each congregation its autonomy to continue meeting or to temporarily suspend its meetings without making these decisions in either case a fellowship issue. Conditions in one area may differ from those in another, so let us remember the principle of congregational autonomy. May we use the more-than-usual time of personal confinement many are experiencing for more Bible study and spiritual growth. While the Northpoint church is continuing all of its meetings, Diane and I – both because of our respective ages (82 and 79) and because we both have heart issues, making us doubly vulnerable – have decided we should not assemble with our brethren until this virus runs its course. It greatly grieves us to thus do, but we believe it is the prudent course under the circumstances. Our brethren here are very understanding and have not been critical of our decision.

Let us redouble our prayers "for kings and all that are in high place; that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and gravity" (1 Tim. 2:1–2). Let us especially pray that our President may have the wisdom, the moral courage, and the physical stamina to lead our nation through the present troubled waters with as little personal and economic loss as possible.

[**Note:** I wrote this article on April 10, 2020, in response to questions regarding the way the church and individual Christians should respond to the Coronavirus pandemic of 2019–2020, especially regarding the governmental mandates in some locales forbidding church assemblies.]

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