

Communion Versus Coronavirus 07-26-20

(NOTE: This lesson was originally prepared as a message from the overseers to the congregation explaining the reasons we are assembling as we do. Some of the wording in the lesson material here reflects this)

The last few months have been hard on us all. We have been diligently praying that this sickness passes over our Spiritual household, and that we are able to continue to function towards the purposes given to the church. The local church is not “where two or more are gathered together” (Matt. 18:20)¹. Instead a local church is a group of Christians who are dedicated to the purposes of the church. One of these important purposes is worship.

In the past our teaching and position has been that “worship” refers to the coming together of the church on the first day of the week for that “assembly” that surrounds partaking of the Lord’s Supper. We want this to be understood, because sometimes brethren call any spiritual action worship. It is not the case that “anything” is worship; worship of the church is a specific assembly time.

As Christians we are honored and obligated to observe the memorial of the Lord’s Supper. We have taught repeatedly that the Lord’s Supper contains three unchangeable characteristics that we must observe to properly worship: the day of observation, the emblems with which we observe it, and the coming together of the Saints. This last point has seen some examination over the last few months. We have a clear statement in Scriptures in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 that in regards to our coming together, the following things define coming together: (1) we come together as a church (vs 18), (2) that we come together in one place (vs20), that we all participate together as a church in one place (and all must be offered this Supper). Finally, we take from this passages that it is important that we 3) discern the other members of the church.

1 Corinthians 11 answers many questions about our ability to worship in difficult times. Can we “worship” online? We can contrast this to 1 Corinthians 11 and ask “is this meeting together in one place” and “is this discerning the body (church) of Christ”? The answer is no; so we have no authority to worship online.

Can we “worship” in divided groups? Again, we ask ourselves “is this meeting together in one place”? “Is this discerning the body of Christ”, meaning are we present and waiting for all the members of the church? Once more, the answer must be “no”. Breaking into groups (divisions in the assembly) does not accomplish the purpose of communion, which

¹ In context, Matthew 18:20 refers to the authority of the Apostles, which earlier in Matthew 16 was called the “Keys to the Kingdom”. It does not refer to a local church.

is meant to testify to unity, seen in the very word itself. Breaking into smaller groups is not “the assembling of ourselves together” Hebrews 10:26.

Many of these alternative paths of worship create problematic fruits. It will be difficult to return divided assemblies together. It may create cliques and divisions that bring problems to the church (1 Cor. 1:11). Finally, for many the current distress offered an opportunity to trust God in a difficult time. Responding in ways that are not authoritative have the potential of weakening our faith and trust in God.

The question continues to arise in regards to possible interruptions of services, including government rules and outbreaks of sickness among us. Our position throughout this crisis has been to apply the Scriptures to these circumstances. First, we will comply with government regulations to the best of our ability, as per Romans 13:1-8. This compliance is limited by Acts 5:29. We will submit up to the point that they directly compel us to worship in an unauthorized way. At that point we will continue to do what God directs us.

We may see members of the community make complaint against us. Our desire is to do what is right in the sight of men (Rom 12:17), but this is also limited by doing what God has ordered. But we have always known that we cannot please the world. John reminds us in 1 John 3:13 that there exists a condition of enmity between us and the world; this is the true basis of the complaints of men.

But there are reasons why we may determine worship services cannot be performed. We have stated in the past that the authority to cancel services exists only in 1 Corinthians 14:40; if we cannot accomplish worship decently and in order (which would include clear and present dangers to our members), we will not meet. We understand that there is an authority to cancel worship, but not to modify it.

We have been very careful in expressing these things because of our desire to avoid opportunities to be critical of other congregations for their actions at this time. We want to encourage all to be careful in passing judgment on others who may not approach worship this way. This is a difficult time, and the autonomy and different circumstances of congregations means we must be careful in how we approach these things. Perhaps in the future there will be a time to examine these things, but now is not that time.

CALL TO ACTION

What do we need to do? First, we need to pray. Pray for our body. Pray that we are spared from this sickness, and if not that we remain faithful if we do endure it. Pray that we do not allow a mind of division or bickering on these matters. Pray for the elders. Pray for

wisdom, patience and strength. We need to pray for our leaders (1 Tim. 2:1-2). It is tempting to criticize their shortcomings, but our Heavenly Father desires we pray for them instead.

Second, all need to resolve to be careful in judgment; judge with righteous judgment (John 7:24). Congregations are different and autonomous, and we want to exercise care in how we consider choices others have made. We are not all in the same circumstances, and while we see our decisions as the authoritative means of action, we need to understand that this is a unique situation, and many congregations are working to understand how to respond.

Be mindful in how you conduct yourself. A time to admonish may come, but this is not that time. This is the time to encourage. Consider that if you don't believe certain regulations are appropriate or beneficial, others in this body do. Use your liberty to choose to serve others, respecting their concerns.

Finally, we encourage and invite you to look at past lessons on our website to see our understanding of the things we have said. Here are some of the lessons we encourage you to examine:

- a. Worship (*The Church Purpose of Worship* - September 8, 2019), (*Worship is NOT* - October 9, 2016)
- b. Communion (*The Purpose of Communion* – January 29, 2017), (*Three Absolutes of Communion* – April 28, 2013), (*Getting the Most from Communion* – January 19, 2020)
- c. Collection (*An Approved Church and Benevolence* – October 20, 2019), (*The Problem with Online Contributions* – Bulletin October 23, 2016)
- d. Cancelling Assembly – (*Can a Congregation Cancel Services* – FAQ, “*Why do you have communion every Sunday*”)