



PERSPECTIVES

WRITINGS FROM OUR DISTRICT APOSTLE

This perspective is a follow-up teaching of Thoughts on Reopening of our congregations, issued in May 2020. Please read this teaching in conjunction with that letter.

Recently the US Supreme Court required New York and California to reconsider restrictions they imposed on places of worship in the wake of COVID-19. As a result, state and local governments may begin exempting places of worship from future restrictions on indoor gatherings, not for reasons of public safety, but solely because it is a constitutional matter. Consequently, the decision whether to gather indoors for church services may be left to the local ministers, in consultation with their district rectors and apostle. These decisions will be made in the best interest of both the spiritual and physical health and wellbeing of our members.

Perhaps, some of our ministers or members have various thoughts that our congregations should be opened or remain open even as the pandemic appears to be worse than ever. Following are various ideas and thoughts that you may have heard. The bullet points are our responses based on Scripture and our doctrine.

A. Some may focus on our members' spiritual well-being, for example:

"We've been taught that the worthy partaking of Holy Communion is indispensable for our salvation, and some have been without Holy Communion for almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of a year."

"We miss the fellowship of the divine service, and the assembly of like-minded believers. For many members, the divine service experience is the highlight of their week and their primary source of interpersonal contact."

"The longer we go without services and other activities, the more we put the faith of our members at risk. The longer we keep our churches closed, the greater the risk that many won't return once they reopen, especially our youth and families with young children."

Spiritual Responses:

- The omnipresent God remains with us, even when we cannot be in a divine service. He continues to provide spiritual food. We've been taught that the Holy Communion we last received will sustain us until we have the opportunity to receive it again. Do we believe this?
- Being unable to attend divine services due to the pandemic does not mean that we cannot deepen our personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Christ lives in those who live in faith in him (Galatians 2: 20, Ephesians 3: 17), even when circumstances prevent us from gathering together, participating in church events, and attending divine services. ***What saves us is our relationship with Him.***
- Even though we are unable to attend divine services and other church activities, it does not mean that this is wasted time as it relates to our preparation for Christ's return.



PERSPECTIVES

WRITINGS FROM OUR DISTRICT APOSTLE

For example, a number of small groups that existed prior to the pandemic found ways to continue even in a socially distanced way (e.g. online). For them, this is a source of strength and fellowship in these difficult times.

- Even though we feel the pain of separation, God will not impose upon us circumstances that are greater than what we can bear, 1 Corinthians 10:13... ***It is in these circumstances allowed by God that He gives us the time to examine and strengthen the personal bond that unites us with Christ.***

B. Some may focus on the actions of Christians past and present, for example:

“The first Christians were willing to risk their lives for the faith, and many died rather than renounce their faith. As Christians today, we should be willing to risk our lives, even if it means catching or transmitting the virus, to stand up for our faith.”

“Apostles Peter and John bluntly told the Jewish council that forbade them to speak the name of Jesus, *Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard (Acts 4: 19-20).* Other Christian denominations have defied the government, demonstrating their faith and ‘standing up for Jesus.’ We should do likewise.”

Spiritual Responses:

- We do not want to tempt the Lord (Luke 4: 12). By excluding churches from its restrictions on indoor gatherings, the government is not saying that it is safe to gather indoors. Nor can we believe that because we are attending a divine service, God will automatically protect us from the virus. Although it is difficult to identify exactly where a person contracted the virus, we have had to close certain congregations temporarily because members attended service, asymptomatic at the time, but a few days later were diagnosed as having the virus; other members who were in contact with the asymptomatic members later became ill and tested positive.
- We are not being persecuted nor are we fighting against an enemy to our faith. We are using a “sound mind” ... *For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind (2 Timothy 1:7).*
- Being allowed to gather for church services does not necessarily mean that we should (1 Corinthians 6:12, 10:23,24). The fact that the government is not restricting us from gathering for reasons unrelated to safety does not mean that it is wise to do so, especially when the pandemic is worse in many parts of the country that it was when we first stopped conducting indoor services.



PERSPECTIVES

WRITINGS FROM OUR DISTRICT APOSTLE

- God's ways and thoughts are different from ours (Isaiah 55:8-9). What seems to be such an obviously good thing - attending divine service, receiving Holy Communion - may not be what God expects of us at this time. In Acts 16:6 we read of Paul's desire to preach the gospel in Asia, but the Holy Spirit did not permit him to do so.
- Our 10th Article of Faith of New Apostolic Church obliges us to obey the worldly authorities provided no godly laws are thereby transgressed, based on Romans 13:1-7. Unlike what happened to Peter and John, no governmental authority that restricted or continues to restrict indoor church services has forbidden us from preaching the gospel. We are free to do so. We are permitted to conduct and then disseminate services over the internet. What has happened is that we have been restricted from gathering, temporarily, while the country and whole world fights a pandemic.

C. Some may focus on personal views, for example:

"I'm tired of not having divine services and other in-church activities. Enough is enough, and now that the government permits them, our churches should open at once."

"I'm tired of the government telling me what I can and cannot do when it comes to practicing my faith."

"I believe that there are many experts who feel that the threat COVID-19 presents is overstated and the negative impact of 'stay at home' orders is understated."

Spiritual Responses:

- We want to follow the Golden Rule (Matthew 7:12). The government is excluding churches from its restrictions on indoor gatherings for reasons unrelated to safety.
 - On a personal level, it is one thing to risk my health by attending a church service, and quite another to risk another's health by attending. Many people who have the virus show no symptoms but can transmit it to others.
 - On a community level, I should consider whether it is wise to engage in actions that could increase the rate of new cases at a time when medical professionals in my community are warning of shortages of hospital beds, medical supplies and personnel, shortages that will not only affect the treatment of COVID-19 cases, but all other medical needs as well. Worse, yet, our medical personnel, many of whom are our brothers and sisters, are not immune to the virus and fall sick or even die in their service to others.
- The coronavirus is real, and its long-term effects are unknown. Depending upon the source, as of December 15th, around 300,000 people have died from the virus in the USA alone, despite the country implementing precautions that are unprecedented in our lifetime. Included in that number are our loved ones, brothers and sisters in faith, and their families.



PERSPECTIVES

WRITINGS FROM OUR DISTRICT APOSTLE

- Perspective is important. Many, if not all of us, are suffering from pandemic fatigue. Perhaps being unable to attend a divine service has become unbearable. Consider a thought the Chief Apostle expressed recently, ***“One of the greatest tests that God imposes upon human beings is that of patience.”*** We see it throughout salvation history. God’s promise to Adam and Eve to send One who would bruise the head of the serpent took 4,000 years of recorded history to be fulfilled. Christians have been waiting for Christ to fulfill His promise to return for over 2,000 years. It took less than 100 years for the Lord to fulfill His promise to Abraham that he and Sarah would have a son - by comparison, a very short time, but no doubt a long time for Abraham.

Our situation has existed for less than one year. Our Chief Apostle has taught - ***“True faith is resistant to the erosion of time.”*** In this context, we have to humbly but critically ask ourselves whether we have utilized all options available to us to experience our faith during this unique time period. With vaccines now starting to be distributed, we can hold on “a little while longer,” trusting in the Lord to provide for us in the meantime.

EWB/LRK

