

Why Our Building is [Still] Closed

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There is quite the uproar in our world right now regarding the restrictions surrounding COVID-19. Things have become so divisive that it seems the only thing people can talk about is masks, COVID, restrictions, politics, and what “side” they fall on.

As different churches are approaching things differently, I thought it would be helpful to explain why our building still remains closed and how we are processing things.

First, here are two things that have NOT impacted our decision to close our building:

- First, our building is not closed because we are **afraid**. Fear should not motivate our decisions and the Elders and I have decided that we will not allow fear to be our decision maker. We are not going to operate out of fear because our hope is in God and not in anything in this world. Ultimately, He is the One we answer to. We are not afraid of the government. We are not afraid of a virus. We are not afraid of public opinion.

We are not afraid of the virus because we are not afraid of death (1 Cor. 15:55).

We are not afraid of the government because God is our highest authority (Rom. 13:1).

We are not afraid of men and what they do or say (Pr. 29:25).

We are not afraid of the Enemy or His plans (1 Jn. 4:4).

- Second, our building is not closed because we **lack faith**. We have heard this accusation many times. This is a different version of the fear accusation. I think it is important to be specific about what this means. Many times when people say it, they mean that we have a lack of faith that God will protect people from getting sick while attending services in the building. My response is that I don't believe we are supposed to have that kind of faith nor have we ever. We have always encouraged people to stay home if they have a fever, we ask people to wash their hands after using the restroom, and we encourage people to cover up open wounds with bandages. We have never assumed that someone couldn't get sick in the church building. I have always made it a practice to wash my hands after shaking many others' during church. Nowhere can I find in Scripture that the gathering of the believers is a guaranteed disease or sin-free zone!

On the other hand, we believe God can heal people from COVID-19 or any other disease. People can be healed in an instant or they can be healed over time. I have seen both and I marvel at God's power. We are still praying for people and laying hands on people. We are still believing that God is healing people. We have never stopped and we won't stop!

We are closed for the following reasons:

1. A **Spiritual** Reason: The Elders have gathered (and continue to gather) to pray and seek the Lord as to His timing and His wisdom for both closing and reopening the building. We are continually asking the Lord to guide us by His Holy Spirit and by His Word. At this time, we believe the building should remain closed.

Furthermore, I as the pastor of Koinonia Church, believe that this is the direction God has given me. I believe the Lord is doing something bigger than what we see with our natural eyes right now. The entire world is dealing with COVID-19, not just the United States. The church all over the world is dealing with the same issues we are dealing with. As I speak to and read interviews with pastors in other countries, I am convinced that the Lord is using this time to break our false conceptions of what the church is and how it operates. He is breaking the church open through this and demonstrating that He does not need a church building to operate out of.

2. A **Respectful** Reason: We have been asked by our local and regional authorities (the government and health officials) to suspend our gatherings for the good of the community. They have asked this same thing of every group. We are under authority as instructed by Scripture (Romans 13) and closing our building is not a violation of God's laws or commands. We have not been asked to do an immoral thing; we have not been asked to stop worshipping God or told to worship any other gods. We want to do our best to operate in a spirit of humility and submission for the good of our community.

Furthermore, I believe the best way to love our neighbor during this pandemic is to restrict ourselves. This means restricting our activities and protecting the least of these. I believe this is not only right, it is what we are called to do.

Am I violating "God's Law" by closing the church building?

As a pastor, pleasing God concerns me. It should concern any follower of Christ. Our ultimate goal should be to please God and to follow His directives. We should never violate God's commands willingly or unwillingly. If we discover that we have, we must repent and correct our actions.

We have two powerful sources that give us information about God's Law. The first is the witness of Scripture (the Bible). The second is the witness of the Holy Spirit speaking to our hearts. The Scripture is our bedrock and our primary source of information. The Holy Spirit illuminates the Scripture to our heart and speaks to us about our individual character and growth and gives us individual directives.

We know that the Holy Spirit will not give us a directive that is in violation with the Scripture because He wrote it (2 Peter 1:21).

In the New Testament, the word church (ekklesia) does not refer to a physical building. And it does not mention the need to keep a building open. Church buildings as we know them are a practical and useful creation, but we see in the book of Acts that they did not exist for some time after the church launched and began to turn the world upside down.

The church met in houses, in marketplaces, and even in the Jewish synagogues. It met around dinner tables, in rented lecture halls, and met in the back of chariots on the way to Ethiopia.

The Scripture that is used most often in this discussion is Hebrews 10:24-25 (I haven't seen any others):

*And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, **not giving up meeting together**, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another--and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*

Some have argued that to close our doors is to violate the direction given to us by the Apostle Paul to "not give up meeting together."

Whenever we interpret Scripture, we seek to understand the principle behind the words, not just the words. I believe we can make the following observations:

- First, the church is encouraged to meet together. That is, people should meet with people because the church is made up of people.
- Second, the church should meet together regularly. And this regular meeting should produce a habit of fellowship in people.

What is not present here is a requirement as to exactly how meetings should happen or even exactly how often. We can imagine plenty of cases where people can't physically meet together—prisoners can't meet, churches are burned down or flooded out, severe weather results in services being canceled, people go on vacation, people get sick and can't leave their houses, etc. In these cases we do not say that these people have violated God's law because we recognize the spirit behind the law is the critical factor.

Whether or not we meet in a church building is not the critical issue at stake in this verse. It is the habit of fellowship. The habit of building up the community of the believers. This can happen in a building or in a house or in a park. It can happen in person or on the phone or via a Zoom video call.

I like meeting together in person. It's lovely. I believe it is even the best. But it is not the only legitimate way for us to fulfill this verse. And I do not feel guilty when I go on vacation or am sick

and miss church. It is not a sin to close a church building for a period of time or even miss corporate church gatherings for a while.

We thank God that we can “meet” as the church in many, many different ways. A closed church building is an invitation to expand when and where the church gathers. This is why we have encouraged and continue to encourage people to meet in their homes and have church with their family and their immediate circles. This is why I have encouraged people to join small groups and meet on Zoom or meet outside on their driveway.

Let us be the church and not just “go” to church.

Are our religious liberties being violated by the Governor’s orders?

No, it is my belief that they are not. I may not like closing our doors. I may not like not being able to meet as we are accustomed to in a large auditorium. I may not like the Governor’s orders or even feel like they are too restrictive or reactionary. But that doesn’t mean that his orders are illegal or that they violate my religious freedoms.

Religious freedoms in our country do have limits. These limits are generally based on the general welfare of the society. For example, even though polygamy was a part of the Mormon religion, it was ruled by the Supreme Court to violate the good of the larger community and therefore could not be practiced. In other words, freedom of religion in our country can be limited for legitimate reasons.

In our current situation, our governor believes that there is a public health reason to temporarily limit certain gatherings. This is not based on them being religious gatherings. If it were, then there would be a problem. In some states, there is a clear argument that the limitation placed upon churches is unfair because other gatherings have not been restricted.

Now, it may be that the way our governor (or other governors) have used their authority to place limits on churches or other institutions or businesses is found to be unconstitutional or inappropriate. But I am not persuaded that this is something that I am ready to be civilly disobedient over because while I might disagree with the policy, I don’t disagree that he has the authority. I will vote accordingly when it comes time for me to express my opinion!

Some Concluding Thoughts

I believe that God is teaching us something new about church and we shouldn’t miss it. Church has become a place you go rather than something you are. And we have been reminded that we really get “stuck” on having our “church” the way we like it.

Whether or not you believe the restrictions are good or bad, we have all been invited into a new understanding of church and community.

I also believe that God has invited us back into a renewed understanding of hospitality and deep relationships. Our culture has exchanged pseudo-relationships for real relationships. This may not be your experience, but I have realized that meeting together with others at church can give me the “feeling” of connection without actual connection. Perhaps it is a gift to be reminded that just seeing other people does not equal hospitality, community, and connection.

Finally, I am more determined than ever to not let things get in the way of my worship. I have learned I can worship with or without a mask. I have learned that I can do church in a whole bunch of different ways. I have learned that when things change, I don't like it, but when I push through and worship anyway, there is something deeper and richer that happens inside of me.

Let His Kingdom Come!

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