

Pastoral Letter to Sessions
Concerning Public Corporate Worship
During Periods of Social Distancing

Essential Nature of Public Corporate Worship

By its very nature the visible church is an assembly or congregation of God's people (based on the Greek word *ekklesia* which is a compound from the preposition *ek*, meaning out of, and the verb *kaleo*, meaning to call; thus *ekklesia* literally means called out ones.). The Church as the body of Christ on earth and in history exists to magnify the truth and grace of Christ as a gathered worshipping assembly.

We find in the Holy Scriptures and the Standards of the ARP Church unequivocal teaching regarding the church's witness and purpose. As far back as the exodus, the prototypical act of salvation, God declared to Moses that Israel's redemption was so that they may "serve" Him (Ex. 3:12; 4:23). The Hebrew word for serve, *abad*, when God is the object can be translated "worship." Thus it is used to describe the ministry related to tabernacle worship that God called the Levites and priests to perform (Num. 3:7-8). Through the redeeming work of Christ and the fulfillment of the New Covenant, God's people, the New Israel, are now a royal priesthood that they may offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ and proclaim the excellencies of him who called them out of darkness into his marvelous light (1 Pet. 2:5, 9). This glorious service is being accomplished by God through sending "His Church into the world to present Jesus Christ through preaching, witnessing, teaching, sacrament, worship, and corporate living." (*Form of Government (FOG)* 1.7) According to our *FOG* 3.1, 2, a "congregation is a company of Christians, with their children, associated together according to the Scriptures for worship" whose purpose is "to glorify God by conducting public corporate worship." Corporate worship is so essential to the purpose of a congregation that the Presbytery has the authority to dissolve a congregation when one "becomes so reduced in its membership and strength as to be unable to maintain the ordinances of regular public worship." (*FOG* 3.21)

Our Standards clearly declare the utmost importance and necessity of corporate worship. God, and God alone, in his revealed will has instituted the acceptable way of worshipping him. (*Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF)* XXI.1) While under the gospel, religious worship is not limited to a certain location (*cf. Directory of Public Worship (DPW)* 3.6), nevertheless, public assemblies (i.e., corporate worship) are not to be carelessly or willfully neglected or forsaken, when God, by his word and providence calleth thereunto. (*WCF* XXI.6; Isa. 56:6-7; Heb. 10:25; Prov. 1:20-21, 24; Prov. 8:34; Acts 13:42; Luke 4:16; Acts 2:42) Hebrews 10:25 specifically warns Christians not to neglect the assembling together of the saints, even when under the pressure of persecution or difficult circumstances. Therefore, Christians have a God-given obligation to gather on the Lord's Day for corporate worship. It is our spiritual duty to be present every single week in corporate worship unless we are providentially hindered. The Lord's Day has been set apart for the worship of God. "It is therefore imperative for all people, especially the people of God redeemed in Christ, to gather together in public assemblies for offering to God the worship He is pleased to receive and has revealed to us in His Holy Word"

for it is “both the happy privilege and the solemn duty of all God’s people to assemble for worship on the Lord’s Day as they are able.” (*DPW* 1.3, 4.4)

Corporate worship on the Lord’s Day as we understand it is a faithful application of the first commandment wherein we acknowledge God “to be the only true God, and our God, and to worship and glorify him accordingly,...calling upon him, giving all praise and thanks, and yielding all obedience and submission to him with the whole man.” (*Westminster Larger Catechism* (*WLC*) 104) Moreover, we fulfill the duties of the second commandment through our corporate worship in “the receiving, observing, and keeping pure and entire, all such religious worship and ordinances as God hath instituted in his word; particularly prayer and thanksgiving in the name of Christ; the reading, preaching, and hearing of the word; the administration and receiving of the sacraments.” (*WLC* 108) As we seek to be faithful in our worship of God, we must also avoid at all cost the sins forbidden in the second commandment that do not conform to his revealed will. In times of social distancing we must be careful to distinguish between corporate worship as God has prescribed and “using, and any wise approving, any religious worship not instituted by God himself.” (*WLC* 109) This calls into question the notion of “virtual worship” where participants are not bodily present in a worship service but merely viewing it from a separate location via electronic media.

In summary, we can plainly draw from the Scriptures and our Standards that the Lord’s Day public corporate worship for the ARP Church and its congregations is the most central expression and purpose of its being. In particular, a congregation’s witness of Christ and his gospel in any community is inseparably linked to its public corporate worship. When this dimension and activity cease, its essential identity and function are jeopardized. Therefore, the session of a congregation should be humble, sober, deliberate, measured, non-reactionary, and prayerful before making any decisions that would lead to the suspension of its public corporate worship. It is a matter that requires biblical clarity and wisdom, one that is a course of last resort. When our Standards include qualification to corporate worship such as “providential hindrances” and “as they are able,” they must be weighed carefully in light of what is reasonably certain and biblically warranted and not speculative and worldly. We must use the truth of Scripture in determining the application of these rare exceptions.

Exceptions to Public Corporate Worship

In determining what situations are biblically valid for the suspension or abstention of corporate worship (these two categories are not identical but for the purpose of this paper they will be treated as one since they both result in the non-participation of worship), we must work from the more clear to the less clear. We can again turn to our Standards for guidance on this subject. In *WCF* XXI.8 and *WLC* 117 we find the categories of “duties/works of necessity and mercy” as valid exceptions to spending “the whole time in the public and private exercises of God’s worship.” The divines made this assessment based on Jesus’ instruction in Matthew 12. Jesus taught that it was lawful to do acts of kindness on the Sabbath, such as pulling an ox out of a ditch. As with the case in Matt. 12, the disciples were permitted to “harvest” grain because they needed food to eat. In our current culture, works of necessity would include law enforcement, utility services, and other sectors of society that are essential. Works of mercy

benefit others who are in need and are considered acts of service. Other examples of such works would include visiting shut-ins, going to the hospital, and doing mercy ministry. These two categories have been generally accepted in the Reformed tradition. (This paper is not intended to deal at length with this debatable topic.)

The other general category of providential hindrances as noted in our Standards are unexpected and unavoidable situations that we cannot resolve immediately thus forbidding some or all from assembling as or with the congregation (ex. natural disasters, illness, hospitalization, or transportation emergencies). Categorically these are by their nature rare and unusual so that they happen infrequently. Furthermore, in some of these situations, changes can be made to alleviate further hindrances if possible. These situations are unforeseen “acts of God” that providentially occur outside of our control. It is impossible to enumerate all the providential hinderances that can occur in a fallen world. If such a list was developed, it would require constant editing. The divines wisely avoided being too specific knowing that unforeseen situations were limitless. But what is to be recognized in all such situations is that the worshipper is prohibited unintentionally from corporate worship. Providential hindrances prevent the worshipper from gathering despite his desire to do so.

Social Distancing and Corporate Worship

What biblical exception might be applied during a pandemic that requires social distancing to prevent the spread of a disease? What biblical rationale, if any, would warrant the suspension of corporate worship? Furthermore, what if the civil magistrate prohibits all public gatherings for the sake of health reasons? Do these situations fall under the category of biblical exceptions for corporate worship? Clearly these two situations differ in that the former is voluntary while the latter is obligatory (regardless of whether or not the civil magistrate is being lawful), nevertheless the end result is the same – no corporate worship.

In the case of a voluntary suspension, the argument could be made that the basis and motivation for doing so is the sixth commandment and to protect and promote life (*WLC* 135-136). By avoiding mass gatherings where close contact is unavoidable in a sanctuary, the spread of the disease is prevented, thus serious illness and potential death are prevented. It is the application of loving your neighbor as yourself - loving them by avoiding the spread of a highly infectious disease that is potentially fatal. Such logic is persuasive and biblically cogent; that is until we weigh the consequence of our action, namely the forsaking of corporate worship. Does the love of neighbor trump the love of God? Can we even ask such a question?

In the case of a civil magistrate’s order to avoid mass gatherings, the argument could be made that the basis and motivation for doing so is the fifth commandment and to honor our authorities (*WLC* 123-128) proving the church to be a model citizen in society. The church, of all people, would not want to rebel against the civil authorities when their intentions are to promote the health and well-being of our neighbors during a pandemic. Furthermore, the civil magistrate’s order is not directly attacking the church as an act of persecution; therefore, the church’s compliance with the order would promote the common good of society, acting as a loving neighbor. Such a response has the obvious appearance of honor and love towards men,

but what about love towards God? How is God the Father honored by denying him the worship he is due?

Both situations above are complicated even more when there is no definite time frame for the suspension. What data is used to determine when it is “safe” again to resume? Is this left to the civil magistrate alone? What if there are conflicting authorities and experts who disagree in their assessment of the pandemic? But most importantly how do we reconcile God’s clear mandate to his people regarding corporate worship (as established above in **Essential Nature of Public Corporate Worship**) and ceasing to do so in one or both scenarios above? Is there a more clear biblical path through this dilemma?

We apparently find ourselves in a situation where the keeping of one command puts us at odds with another. Is there a way we can act in good conscience without compromising any of God’s law? Once again, we can turn to our Standards to shed some light onto this topic.

With regard to the civil authority, *WCF* chapter 20 (Of Christian Liberty, and Liberty of Conscience) provides some helpful guidelines to navigate through this apparent dilemma. Section two states: “God alone is lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to his word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship. So that to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commandments out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience: and the requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also.” In all areas of life, Christians are to submit to God’s word and will ultimately. If the civil authority requires or stipulates that we do anything that contradicts his will, we must disobey man. God is the supreme authority. As R. C. Sproul writes, “It is God who instructs us to obey the civil magistrate; it is not the civil magistrate who has lordship over our conscience.” Peter and John declared in Acts 4:19, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.” Later in Acts 5:29, Peter and the apostles proclaim, “We must obey God rather than men.” For a session to suspend completely corporate worship indefinitely is to obey men and to disobey God. Moreover, by their actions they have forced their members to seek corporate worship elsewhere in order to appease their conscience in obedience to God. The session is not exercising their responsibility in accordance with Scripture and the Standards (*FOG* 6.8.L). Regardless of the motives of the civil magistrate, whether it be to punish the church or not, the obedience of the order results in disobedience to God. In such a case, the unlawful authority of man has been given precedence over the lawful authority of God.

With regard to the health and wellbeing of our neighbor, our Standards provide a rubric by which to determine the priority of God’s laws. This dilemma can be resolved by determining which sin, forsaking corporate worship or possibly causing the death of our neighbor, is more heinous and thus choosing to do the other. Question 151 of the *LC* asks: “What are those aggravations that make some sins more heinous than others?” It then provides four qualifications that properly lead us to a choice that ultimately honors God. They are as follow: “Sins receive their aggravations,”

1. "From the persons offending." In this case, the persons committing the offense is the session, the elders of the congregation. Therefore, due to the "office" they hold in the church and that they are "guides to others" make either offense more heinous than other sins. Sessions need to proceed soberly and prayerfully with either decision.
2. "From the parties offended." This qualification helps us make an obvious differentiation between the two offenses. In forsaking worship the sin is "immediately against God, his attributes, and worship." It is an offense of the highest order. In the other case, it is against "any of the saints, particularly weak brethren" or "any other, and the common good of all or many." As serious as it may be to participate in the death of another person, denying God his rightful worship is far worse.
3. "From the nature and quality of the offense." Again forsaking corporate worship according to this qualification is a more heinous offense due to it relating to the first table of the law of God and the essential nature that corporate worship is to the church.
4. "From circumstances of time and place." Forsaking corporate worship strikes at the very heart of the Lord's Day. God has set it apart for this vital purpose.

Based on LC 151, we can confidently conclude that out of the two possible sins, it would be far worse to forsake corporate worship than possibly be an unwitting party to a person's death. The former sin is more willful and deliberate while the latter is consequential and unintentional. That being said, there are reasonable measures that a session can responsibly take that would in great measure alleviate the potential risk of infection for the most vulnerable to the disease. In turn, taking such efforts can make this decision a near non-issue.

In summary, based on the Scriptures and our Standards the decision of the session should be at all cost to honor the Lord first and foremost. This goal will reasonably lead the session to continue some form of public corporate worship as much as and as long as possible. This act of obedience may come at a cost, criminal charges and possibly death due to infection, but honoring Christ means denying ourselves, taking up our crosses, and following him, especially in a culture that does not honor him. No matter how difficult or costly it may be, by faithfully worshipping God we are declaring that the steadfast love of the Lord is better than life (Ps. 63:3). And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him (Heb 11:6). May our sessions lead our congregations in seeking the Lord by ever drawing near to him in our weekly corporate worship.

Adjustments to Corporate Worship with Social Distancing

Here are some practical steps to make corporate worship safer.

- High risk individuals should be encouraged to stay home (but they may choose to attend in good conscience if they are so bound). Such individuals who attend public worship do according to their conscience. No one's conscience has been violated especially those who feel duty bound to worship publicly having determined by personal assessment that they are not providentially hindered by a virus.
- Congregants who voluntarily attend should feel well, be free of flu like signs and symptoms including fever and without *KNOWN* COVID 19 exposure (without use of

appropriate personal protective equipment).

- Those with tender consciences are to be lovingly and patiently excused from attending.
- Crowd density can be reduced by multiplying services. If a church normally has one morning service, it can conduct two or more thereby cutting the crowd size and allowing more space.
- Social distancing can be achieved by marking off every other pew, having households sit in clusters, and requiring six or more feet between them. Worshippers can be dismissed one row at a time while practicing social distancing.
- Healthy hygiene can be achieved by eliminating handshakes and hugs, by eliminating use of pew Bibles and hymnals, and putting all necessary information in the bulletins. Collection plates can be placed at the doors rather than being passed. Pews and chairs can be sanitized after each service, and if multiple services are being conducted, the markers can be moved from the unused to the used pews/chairs for the next service. Limit the number of entrances and leave doors open so they do not need to be touched by worshippers. Provide hand sanitizer and tissues at each entrance.
- Nurseries closed and infants remain at home with their parents to participate via the livestream.
- Sunday school and other non-essential services of the church that require closeness may be cancelled.

These efforts for most congregation under 200 members will allow them to continue public corporate worship without having to alter their order of service too drastically. If other measures need to be made, then the session should enlist as many volunteers as necessary to make it happen taking the necessary safety precautions. Regardless, the effort that is invested will surely yield a harvest a hundredfold and for eternity. Such sacrifice is undoubtedly worth every drop of sweat. It is offered up for nothing less than the worship of our Triune God. God deserves and is worth at least that much of our lives. Pray for protection. Pray for safety. But more than that pray for the faith and peace to worship the Lord without reservation full of joy to his glory, forever and ever, AMEN.