

COVID-19 has changed our world in many ways. Not least of which is our traditional church service. This is something I have been struggling with and working through.

I grew up going to church every week. This was non-negotiable. This non-negotiable aspect changed when I started University. I remember getting up on that first Sunday living on my own and getting ready for church. I recall the strange freedom I felt of there not being anyone compelling me to go to church or expecting me to do so. That day I remember making that decision that I would continue going to church. Even then at a different church, I continued with basically the same format of church that I was used to, and this continued as I attended a few different churches as I moved around the country.

This March, things changed considerably. Suddenly, we were no longer deciding whether or not we were going to attend church. The fact of the matter is we were not allowed to attend the physical church building on the upcoming Sunday. The blueprint for church I had been used to my entire life was suddenly no longer permitted. Again, I felt a strange freedom surrounding church attendance, but this time I did not have the option to go with what was familiar. As a family, we tried to make the most of it, and tried to make our Sundays as normal as possible regarding church while we were not able to meet in person. Finally, we were able to go back to attending the church building, but really, this was not normal either.

Throughout this period, I found myself getting frustrated with how our church was handling this situation. There were things I wished the church was doing, that it wasn't. I realized at some point that I was blaming the church leadership for this change which I was forced to endure. Although our church leadership was making some decisions, the situation they were having to address was largely beyond their control. I eventually recognized that I was becoming frustrated and mourning the loss of the "church" I was used to. The church leadership was not necessarily doing anything wrong, but they were making changes to my blueprint of church I was used to. This is what I was getting frustrated with, but it was unfair to place this blame on the church leadership. Instead of being frustrated with the leadership, I should be lamenting the situation surrounding COVID-19 that we are all in. Instead of being upset about the state of the local church, I should be doing my best to support and effect God's Church and his Kingdom in this time.

There are two things I have been learning about the Church in the past number of months which have guided my response to these changes. First, this time has challenged me to go back to the basics of what church is about. It has challenged me to decide what activities are required of us by God in being his church and what is merely tradition. Second, I have been challenged to consider that my views on Church may not be the same as those of everyone else's.

In considering what church should look like, it is important to recognize which activities God requires of us and which are merely traditions. In Isaiah 1, God reprimands the Israelites for their sacrifices and prayers. In verse 11, it says "What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the Lord; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats." And in verse 15, it says "When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood."

On the face of it, this seems contradictory. God commands sacrifices in many different contexts in the Old Testament. Prayer is something important in our relationship with God. However, Faith is not about tradition and rote obedience. The explanation of this apparent contradiction is seen in verses 16-17: "Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, 17 learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the

widow's cause." If we are focused on looking like we are doing the right things, we are not going to honour God. Even if we are following the same actions, we can bring God honour in that if that is our intention, and He will be pleased. The Israelites were following certain traditions, but not honouring God's heart for these as made clear by the fact that they were not removing evil and doing good, seeking justice, and correcting oppression. If they were, I expect God would have been appreciative of the sacrifices.

Similarly, our church practices and traditions, though often valuable and frequently something that has assisted us in being the Church as God has called us to be are in some cases (or maybe even most cases) not absolutely required. We should evaluate which practices in the church are required by God, which ones help us to accomplish the objectives required of us, and which ones, even if they are seemingly good, do not advance what God wants us to do as a church. If we focus on those things which God requires of us, some of the other stuff that we are doing to assist us in that will be valuable. However, if we are focussed on the secondary things and neglecting the focus that God wants us to have, we are not going to be honouring God like we should. COVID-19 gives us a good opportunity to evaluate what we are doing as a church.

So what should church look like? What actions should we be taking? Acts 2:42-47 is often looked at as an example for the church to follow. It says:

42 And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. 43 And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. 44 And all who believed were together and had all things in common. 45 And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. 46 And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, 47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

This passage outlines four activities which characterized the early church: The apostles teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayers. By extension, this is what is commanded of the Church. It is important to cultivate all four to truly reflect the church as God intended. One writer comments as follows:

"Where no attention is given to teaching, and to constant, lifelong Christian learning, people quickly revert to the worldview or mindset of the surrounding culture, and end up with their minds shaped by whichever social pressures are most persuasive, with Jesus somewhere around as a pale influence or memory. Where people ignore the common life of the Christian family (the technical term often used is 'fellowship', which is more than friendship but not less), they become isolated, and often find it difficult to sustain a living faith. Where people no longer share regularly in 'the breaking of bread' (the early Christian term for the simple meal that took them back to the Upper Room 'in remembrance of Jesus'), they are failing to raise the flag which says 'Jesus' death and resurrection are the centre of everything' (see 1 Corinthians 11:26). And whenever people do all these things but neglect

prayer, they are quite simply forgetting that Christians are supposed to be heaven-and-earth people. Prayer makes no sense whatever—unless heaven and earth are designed to be joined together, and we can share in that already.”

Acts for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1–12, NT Wright, 2008

Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, London UK

Technology is great in many ways and it has certainly allowed us to continue with receiving teaching. Prayer can be done on an individual basis easily at any time. Even if we are looking for collective prayer, that can be accomplished over video or by phone. Although it's difficult to share the communion table with those around us we can still declare Jesus death and resurrection to those around us. (if there is anyone around us) However, the fellowship aspect is (at least in my experience) more difficult to cultivate long distance and/or online. To cultivate fellowship in the absence of meeting together requires significant intentionality, and even then is somewhat lacking. Consequently, this is something I have missed about attending church personally.

In returning to church, I have longed for that fellowship that has been somewhat absent over the past number of months due to the inability to physically meet. I have enjoyed the fellowship we have had as we have returned, but the distancing rules still make it difficult. As a result, I think we need to intentionally cultivate relationships with others in the church as we go forward.

As we move forward, it is important that we cultivate each of the four markers of the church outlined in the foregoing passage. As we consider what activities and practices to reopen in the church, let's first consider how they contribute to these four principles as well as our vision as a church

In terms of relating to those I disagree with, I wanted to look at Romans 14:1-16. It reads:

As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. 2 One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. 3 Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. 4 Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

5 One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. 6 The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God. 7 For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. 8 For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. 9 For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

10 Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; 11 for it is written,

“As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me,  
and every tongue shall confess to God.”

12 So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.

13 Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. 14 I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. 15 For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died. 16 So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil.

COVID-19 has brought out a lot of different opinions, especially about COVID-19. People are being forced to change without a strongly supported reason why. In addition, I think people have had more time to think through things. As a result, people debate, for example, the necessity of masks, hand sanitizer, and social distancing. Knowledgeable people are found on both sides of debate for each of those issues. The fact of the matter is that the oldest science relating specifically to COVID-19 is less than one year old, and people are scrambling to come up with reasoned answers. Thankfully, the Bible addresses COVID-19 specifically in 2 Thessalonians 2:22. Actually, Paul forgot to write that verse, so we are instead left with Christian principles to follow. Although though they are absolute, how to apply them is not always (including in this case) 100% clear.

As we interact with others, it is imperative that we think through relevant issues. Once we do, we need to come to a decision. We can and should act in accordance with that decision as long as our actions do not grieve our brothers and sisters. If we do grieve them we would no longer, as Paul puts it, be walking in love. We need to recognize that others may come to a different conclusion that is equally well reasoned (or even not as well reasoned) where they perhaps emphasize other principles or even believe different facts which inform their decision. When we interact with people with different opinions, there are two things we should consider. One concerns how we relate to people as they act in accordance with their conclusions. The second relates to the recognition of their views. It is important to note that we are talking about issues that, though they may be important, are not necessary for our salvation. When we get into issues of salvation, the approach should be different.

Once someone comes to a conclusion on an issue, there is nothing wrong, and, in fact, I would say it is good, to challenge their views, but always respectfully. We are commanded not to “quarrel over opinions”. We should, however, challenge others to grow in their faith and knowledge of the truth. Healthy debate on those opinions furthers that objective. However, in discussing these issues, we should not judge others, even if they are not convinced by what we have to say. We should remain humble to accept the possibility that someone else’s view is correct, and if convinced, then we should change our mind. As Christians, we should be seeking the truth. We are to rightly handle the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15). We are to stand firm with the belt of truth buckled around our waist (Ephesians 6:14). We are commended to worship in Spirit and in truth (John 4:24). Jesus prayed in the high-priestly prayer asking that his church be sanctified by the truth (John 17:17). We should pursue the truth in our lives, and this pursuit and being like-minded in Christ should be our starting point. When we disagree with someone on this type of issue, we should not be telling them they are wrong in having a certain opinion or acting a certain way. However, it is good to say “I disagree”. There likely will be a “right” answer, but often times, only God will know what it is. If two individuals can discuss the matter, hopefully they can push each other towards the right answer as they consider each other’s perspectives.

As we consider how to interact with those who disagree with us as we open church again, we need to remember that we may disagree, but that doesn’t mean that we should judge them. Instead we need to support them as they act in accordance with their beliefs and ensure we don’t put a stumbling block in

their way. When we disagree, we should work together to seek the truth and be humble to change our minds if we openly consider the point and realize that our previous conclusion should be corrected.

In light of everything going on, it is clear that our world is changing quickly. I heard an analogy recently that 2020 has been like a slide with a steep drop off. We were going along in life quite smoothly until the ground dropped out from under this. I think we can all understand this. However, this speaker suggested that we think of 2020 differently – as a launching pad. Let's use this pandemic for God's glory as we revisit church and seek to be intentional in our actions. But let us not forget that we have differing opinions on how we should be dealing with COVID-19. Let us each be convinced in our own minds, but let our actions be full of grace when we disagree.