

Why Christians should gather in person - despite the risk!

(Adapted from sermon notes...11 minutes reading time)

In a message I gave on August 1st and 2nd at Calvary Chapel FourteenSix in Surprise, Arizona, I laid out Biblical reasons Christians should gather in person – despite the medical risk and, if necessary, in defiance of civil mandates to close churches or restrict attendance. I do not deny the medical risk or the impact of potentially defying civil authority, but I believe gathering as followers of Jesus Christ is a Biblically mandated risk Christians must take.

Jesus experienced a similar conflict in the first century A.D. when the legitimate civil and religious authorities issued executive orders about how laws were to be obeyed and used public humiliation to force compliance. For example, it was the law of the land that no work could be done on the Sabbath day, so political leaders issued decrees about how many steps you could take before walking turned into work and that carrying food that exceeded the weight of a dried fig was a violation of Sabbath law. Arbitrarily defining Biblical principles to this extreme, however, fully missed the point of the rules - a fact Jesus pointed out sharply.

This legalistic mindset about “how to think about rules” is described by ethicists and philosophers as **Unqualified Absolutism**. In this view, since rules are absolute, if there is a conflict between rules you must keep them all exactly. The result is severe legalism and a power elite defining the nit and gnat of every rule.

Jesus certainly affirmed God’s laws are absolute, but He also taught that there is a ranking of Biblical principles between higher & lower. Thus, when there is a conflict between rules, you should choose the higher principle. In fact, Jesus made it clear there is no sin committed when a person chooses to obey a higher rule at the expense of a lower rule. This mindset is called **Graded Absolutism**. The result is a reasonable working out in real life of Biblical principles.

For example, in Matthew 5:19 Jesus affirmed there is a least commandment. In Matthew 22:36, He affirmed there is a greatest commandment and He taught in Matthew 23:23 that moral laws were “weightier” than ceremonial or civil rules. In fact, Jesus used the “what is work on the Sabbath” issue to affirm a “graded absolutist” teaching...

Matthew 12: 1 - 5 (NASB)

At that time Jesus went through the grain fields on the Sabbath, and His disciples became hungry and began to pick the heads of grain and eat. 2 But when the Pharisees saw this, they said to Him, “Look, Your disciples do what is not lawful to do on a Sabbath.” 3 But He said to them, “Have you not read what David did when he became hungry, he and his companions, 4 how he entered the house of God, and they ate the consecrated bread, which was not lawful for him to eat nor for those with him, but for the priests alone? 5 Or have you not read in the Law, that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple break the Sabbath and are innocent?”

The point Jesus makes is that King David and his men ate the consecrated bread because the principle of preserving their lives was greater than the ceremonial rule

about who can eat consecrated bread. Jesus capped off His teaching by pointing out it is lawful for the priests to do their "work" on the Sabbath; thus, the exceptions prove the rule – there is a higher and a lower consideration in God's view of ethics! Today, some Christians argue that to gather in person despite the medical risk or in defiance of civil executive orders, is a violation of Romans 13:1. It reads...

Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. 2 Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves.

When Covid 19 restrictions were first issued in March 2020, I used this verse to justify shutting down because the civil authorities claimed they were protecting our people from something potentially as deadly as the Black Plague or Spanish flu. Those diseases were likely responsible for 50 to more than 200 million deaths, so considering such a threat, it was reasonable to comply with the civil mandate since the principle of preserving life is greater than the principle of gathering together.

But if you ignore the distinctions between higher and lower Biblical principles then it appears – based on Romans 13:1 – that you must obey civil government no matter what! This reminds me of a woman I knew who admitted having turned in her neighbors during the occupation of France in World War II for hiding Jews. She told me, with tears in her eyes, that she still felt justified because, after all, "The Bible says we have to obey the government...right?" Is this what Paul had in mind when he wrote the book of Romans? Since I believe Jesus taught Graded Absolutism, I do not think so. When it became clear Covid 19 was not the Black Plague or Spanish Flu 2.0, I reconsidered. I discovered that Covid 19 was about as viral as pneumonia and flu, I noted some politicians who ordered churches closed also joined protest marches saying "protests are a sacred American right," and I paid attention when, on July 24, 2020, the Supreme Court of the United States ruled the state of Nevada can put tighter restrictions on churches than casinos. Why such arbitrary restrictions on churches when the first amendment right to worship is as sacred as the right to peaceably assemble for the redress of grievances?

These and other questions put me in mind of a Biblical example found in Exodus chapter one. At that time, (approximately 1,446 B.C.), the rightful king of Egypt issued an executive order to kill all Hebrew baby boys. Keep in mind, the king's order was made before the Ten Commandments were written down, long before there was international law or any notion of individual rights – particularly for slaves. And keep in mind the king of Egypt had the world's largest standing army at his beck and call too. Notice what happened...

Exodus 1: 17 (NASB)

But the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt had commanded them, but let the boys live. **18** So the king of Egypt called for the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this thing, and let the boys live?" **19** The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not as the Egyptian women; for they are

vigorous and give birth before the midwife can get to them.” **20** So God was good to the midwives...

There is no hint in the Bible that God disapproved of the midwives even though they lied to the king and defied his executive order, because the midwives chose the higher principle against murder at the expense of the lower principle of obedience to civil government.

Now, some Christians are also concerned that gathering in person and potentially exposing so many people to disease is not “loving our neighbor” as Jesus commanded in Matthew 22:39. And a quick glance at our local statistics does paint a grim picture. Maricopa.gov reports that from January 22, 2020 to July 28, 2020 there have been 110,769 positive tests for Covid 19 and 1,809 deaths - a 1.6% death rate. That is horrible, but Maricopa.gov also reports that as of July 28, 2020, there have been 4,136 deaths from flu and pneumonia since September 2019.

So...follow a possible logical argument here - if you look at these numbers in an Unqualified Absolutist way...

Since “loving one’s neighbor as oneself” means we ought not to knowingly put a vulnerable person at risk...and flu, pneumonia and Covid are spread by community interaction, then it follows that the most “loving” thing Christians could do would be not to meet in-person at all – ever! After all, flu and pneumonia have been attacking vulnerable people long before anyone ever heard of Covid.

But is Jesus advocating an Unqualified Absolutist position in Matthew 22:39. No - because this verse comes immediately after Matthew 22:38 where Jesus affirmed the greatest commandment is to love God with all your heart, soul and mind. In short, the principle of loving one’s neighbor is subordinate to loving God as one’s highest devotion.

More than that, Jesus used the Greek word ἀγαπάω (agapaō) for “love” and this word means “to sacrificially seek the highest and the best interest of another person.” Sometimes to seek the highest and best interest of others can mean tough love (such as discipline) or taking a risk of pain such as when a parent insists a child go to the dentist. Agape love is not always practiced without risk or danger. And this brings me to Hebrews 10:23. It reads...

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; **24** and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, **25** not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.

“The day” mentioned here refers to the last day of human history. In my view, based on my study of the book of Revelation and other passages, the time of human future-history is short; thus, by this passage, we should be gathering all the more, not less! The principle of gathering as a body is Biblically reinforced since it is simply bad medicine to carve up a body and call it healthy (and the church is called the body of Christ). The Old Testament is filled with examples of gathering: the required feasts, the

covenants, the temple, and synagogue systems. Most importantly, in the New Testament, Jesus instituted a gathering and meal we call communion. In fact, Jesus commanded that His followers continue the communion gathering on a regular basis to build and maintain spiritual community. Since I believe Jesus is God in the flesh, then our gathering in communion is not a suggestion – it is the command of God Himself! Finally, the earliest Christians gathered in defiance of Rome because they saw the command to gather together in communion as a greater principle than Roman law. For that they were beaten and jailed and killed.

So I ask...since it is a greater principle to gather as believers than the principle of obedience to civil authorities, and if our ancestors risked the wrath of the gladiators and the Colosseum so we could have a Bible in our laps today - should we not risk the wrath of a governor? Or of a virus?

Now – to be clear, I have argued there are higher and lower principles in God’s ethic and the principle of preserving life is higher than other rules. This means that if you have a serious medical condition such as COPD or Asthma or if you are actually sick – then by all means, stay home! But if you are healthy and have no pre-existing medical condition – where is the courage and devotion that drove the earliest Christians to continue to gather no matter the cost? Where is the devotion that lead Peter and his friends - arrested, beaten and commanded by the legitimate authorities at the time not to gather or teach in Jesus name any longer - to proclaim in Acts 5:29, “we must obey God rather than man?”

In the end, God’s higher law is that Christians remain physically, socially, and spiritually connected, so whenever possible we must resist the trend to drift apart. There are caveats for the medically compromised but in our case, our church will remain open regardless of any political mandate.

Yes - as the leader of this congregation, I am prepared to accept the consequences of my leadership up to, and including, being arrested and detained...But the great cloud of witnesses to my faith that came before me deserve nothing less.