

A Pastoral Letter

to the saints who are feeling guilty and may be tempted to take unbiblical measures to assuage their spiritual hunger and self-imposed guilt

C.N. Willborn | April 2020

We live in most unusual days. Presently our civil leaders, to whom we are to submit unless they command us to disobey God, have given us clear directives on how to promote the public health of ourselves and neighbors. Here in Tennessee, Governor Lee issued a statement last week, one which we are still living under as citizens: “Executive Order 17 prohibits social gatherings of 10 or more people...”. I realize some Christians have taken such directives, particularly as it pertains to churches, as “against God.” Let me address that briefly.

The root command to observe and remember the Sabbath day and to keep it holy is the fourth commandment, found in Exodus 20:8 and repeated in Deuteronomy 5:12. This, of course, is the codified version of that which came in the creation covenant with Adam before the fall and sin entered into the world. Concerning this command I want to make two important contextual comments and one general. I hope this helps hurting hearts and confused minds.

1. **We need to remember that this command was always intended for our good.** If the Lord’s day turns into something legalistic, then it is harmful to our souls. This command must always be kept through grace and not works. Sadly, this of all the commands can be the easiest to misuse. We can do all the right things—gather for worship, keep the biblically prescribed elements in our liturgy, say all the right words in Psalms and hymns and prayers, rest and refrain from work appropriate for the six days of labor, read good material—and yet violate the commandment and do harm to our souls (and sometimes to our bodies), because we did it out of legalism rather than out of a grace-infused love for the day and the Lord of the day. If you feel bad when you can’t gather to worship because “I’m supposed to do this” or even “because I know God commanded it,” then you may be violating the day. Rather, we are properly to look forward to it and properly to miss it when sick or providentially hindered, simply because we love the day and all which it involves. The day is for our good and should not be turned into something “we have to do.”
2. **We need to remember that the fourth commandment is in the context of ten!** If we keep the Sabbath day and do it “no matter

how it may affect our neighbor,” then we have violated the command. In other words, if we keep this command at the expense of another command, or even the potential harm of another, then we have broken it! We have disobeyed God! Remember, the entire second table of the law, commandments 5-10, are about loving our neighbor as we love our selves. That is what the OT says (Lev 19:19) and that is what the NT says (Matt 19:19; 22:39; Mark 12:31, 33; Lk 10:27; Rom 13:9; Gal 5:14; James 2:8). Note particularly Galatians 5:14, which reads: “For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” We confess that we believe this every month in our worship service on the first Lord’s Day morning. We confess that we believe this every time we read it in our devotions. Do we really believe it?

Concerning the “love of neighbor,” let us be reminded that both the Old Testament and New Testament speak to an aspect of Sabbath keeping that relates to keeping the day in the proper way. Particularly, I am speaking of deeds of necessity and mercy (Isa 58:13, 14; Luke 4:16; 14:5; Matt 12:1-13; Mark 2:23-3:5; Westminster Confession of Faith 21:8). In our present national situation set before us in God’s most wise providence, it is both necessary and merciful for us to observe the civil magistrates’ call to think more highly of others than self (Phil 2:3). It is necessary to love our neighbors by protecting them, and it is an act of mercy to avoid the contraction and spread of the virus by following the wisdom of our civil leaders.

3. Now let me make a general observation about the importance of keeping the Lord’s Day, while at the very same time obeying those “kings” given us for our good (Rom 13:1-4; 1 Pet 2:13-17). The Westminster Confession of Faith gives us the biblical balance that is needed in times like these when it says that public assemblies of Christ’s church are not “carelessly or willfully to be neglected” (WCF 21.6). For Christ’s church indiscriminately to meet in days of widespread sickness, a sickness that is highly communicable, would be careless. While we desire to meet, we are lamenting the disease and the consequences it has brought upon us, especially a Psalm 42 absence from public worship. With the Psalmist, we long for a return with the throng to His worship. Therefore, we are not carelessly and willfully neglecting the worship, therefore, we are not

disobeying God in following the wisdom of the civil leaders and medical community.

Keeping the context of the fourth commandment in mind—it is for our good, not our harm and it must be out of love and concern for our neighbor’s welfare—will help us think through the appropriateness of our Governor’s “love your neighbor” Ordinances and how we approach ALL corporate gatherings, including church services.

With that said, here at Covenant we are continuing to offer a semblance of worship to our God even though we can’t gather corporately as we love to do. With a few elders (not all, for some are quarantined due to possible exposure) and a deacon (for the deacons’ prayer) we are maintaining a service to lead you in your homes. We are unlike the house churches in China and other parts of the world and unlike the house churches in the early days when Christianity fell under the label of *religio illicita* or a religion lacking formal legal recognition. In those house churches they contained and do contain the gathering of an entire church corpus—elders, deacons, and members with a minister. They were not simply one or two families gathered such as are around our computer or television screens. You are in essence joining those of us who can meet without violating the Civil Magistrate’s Ordinance 17, so that we can love our neighbors, but also provide us all something of a platform to worship our God in our homes, without forgetting the Day and the corporate body of Christ.

Now, let me get to another aspect of this whole unique epoch in which we find ourselves. Just as some Christians may wrongly *feel* like they are disobeying God (and the fourth commandment specifically) by obeying the Governor and loving their neighbor, so some may feel guilty for not receiving the weekly or monthly (in our case) administration of the Lord’s Supper. Here is what you need to know on that issue so you don’t wrongly fret or do something worse like pour yourself and your family a glass of wine or grape juice and break open a fresh baked loaf of bread and “have the Lord’s Supper” at home. Give attention to what follows to rightly remember how the Lord’s Supper is to be thought of in these unusual days.

First, consider the word from which we gain synagogue. It means “gather together,” and this refers to gathering together in a physical sense. Our Lord used it to speak of physical gatherings (Matt 18:20). It was used for the place where the people of God would gather physically (e.g., Mark 1:21; Acts 9:20). The point is that the synagogue was where New Testament Gospel period (we find it in the Old Testament context also) Christians gathered physically to worship. It was the pre-runner to the concept of

church (*ekklesia*) or a “duly summoned body” or “called assemblage” as in Matt 16:18. That is, we are talking about a summons to gather with others in a specified location and that physically. Remember, we are *members of the body* when we are scattered about in our homes, but we are *the body of Christ, the visible church*, when all the members are together in visible form.

This idea of corporate, physical gathering is the foundation then for our Confession of Faith when it states, concerning the two sacraments, “neither of which may be dispensed by any, but by a minister of the Word lawfully ordained” (27:4). That means a father or mother cannot dispense the elements. An individual cannot administer to oneself. Then in WCF 29.2 the minister of the gospel is instructed to give the elements “to the communicants; but to none who are not then present in the congregation.” Notice “present in the congregation.” The physical presence of the people is of the essence. This means you have to be physically present where the minister is in order to receive from “a minister of the Word lawfully ordained.” There are many examples of Christians, those well versed in the Bible, who lived in remote places where a minister of the gospel had not yet reached them, living for years *without* the Lord’s Supper. They waited for the sacrament to be administered biblically before they received it. Why? So that they might receive it in a worthy manner (1 Cor 11:27) and be nourished and not bring judgement on themselves (1 Cor 11:23-34).

In 1 Cor 11:20 we have Paul stressing the togetherness idea again with a third word, *synerchomai*, which again insists upon the “coming-togetherness” of the church when the sacrament is dispensed. The words and verses mentioned here establish the foundation for our Book of Church Order in relation to the Lord’s Supper. In a part of the “Directory of Public Worship” which is constitutional, that is, binding on the churches of the PCA, we receive clear guidance on where and when the Lord’s Supper can be observed.

The table, on which the elements are placed, being decently covered, and furnished with bread and wine, and the communicants orderly and gravely sitting around it (or in their seats before it), the elders in a convenient place together, the minister should then set the elements apart by prayer and thanksgiving (PCA BCO 58-5).

So, what do we see concerning the Lord’s Supper? It is to be observed when the minister, the elders, and communicants can sit around a table together or in the physical presence of the minister and elders (as in the pews or chairs in the worship hall) and physically partake together. Paul said we are to “wait for one another” (1 Cor 11:33) before we partake. All of this

is in the context of a corporate worship service after the word of God has been faithfully preached.

In conclusion, let us not “legalize” the Sabbath Day. Let us not “beat ourselves up” because we are keeping the Governor’s ordinance and the law of Christ to love our neighbors by promoting and preserving their health. Finally, don’t think that you are missing anything because you can’t partake of the cup and the bread. Everything you need is found in the written, read, and preached word. You get nothing different in the sacraments of baptism and Lord’s Supper than you get in the preached word. The instruction on the Lord’s Supper is “as often as you eat and drink,” and please note that this is as specific on the matter of frequency as the New Testament gets. There is no command to do it weekly or monthly or quarterly or annually. I mention all those options because that is how it is observed in various churches and has been through the centuries since Christ Jesus. Certainly, if it were *essential* to our weekly or monthly worship then God would have been more specific. He surely is on many other elements of His worship. The element that is necessary to worship is the preaching and hearing of God’s word. Do not ever forget, faith comes by hearing and hearing by the preaching of the word by a lawful minister of the gospel (Romans 10:14-17).

The Lord’s Supper is not essential to worship every Lord’s day. In fact, the Lord’s Supper is not worthwhile at all, but only spiritually damaging, without the word of God preached before it, no matter when (or how often) it is observed. So, what do we really need this coming Lord’s Day? What do we really need for faith and life practices? The word of God. How sufficient is the preached word of God to communicate all the grace we need? It is *all* sufficient.

During these strange and sad days when we are under the dark cloud of this pandemic, let us not pummel ourselves and riddle ourselves with false guilt and false grace. This pandemic is God’s providence for us. He knows well our limitations and restrictions. He has given all we need for these days, namely His Word. Let our faith be elevated through the preaching of the word. In days of physical limitations there are no limits to the access God’s preached word has into the hearts and minds of hungry, hurting souls.

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